On A Wing And A Prayer

One fan's perspective on an inspirational journey with the Detroit Red Wings

by Gus Mollasis

foreword by Dave Brittain Digitized by the Internet Archive in 2012

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With a Foreword by Dave Brittain

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a Prayer...for the Wings

To Vladimir Konstantinov and Sergei Mnatsakanov, the two Wings who at the time of this writing are making great strides toward flying again. My hopes and prayers are with you, today, tomorrow and forever. May God bless you and your families.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the spirit of those who play in the game of life. To those who compete fairly, honestly and with a zest for life. To those individuals who show up no matter what the score is and play hard with a winning attitude. To those who want to fly and soar above the crowd in pursuit of their dreams, I give you my wings.

for Craig & Doug, my two pals, who are flying with Angels

A man who has Imagination has Wings

Foreword by Dave Brittain

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A Foreword by Dave Brittain

Gus Mollasis is a fan. I am a fan of Gus Mollasis. Gus has reached into his soul to describe his love affair with the Detroit Red Wings, their fans, the city of Detroit and most importantly, his faith and family. His testament of love takes you from his childhood to becoming an adult, where as a man, he is able to maintain a boy's enthusiasm to a sport. Many of us, as we become older, become jaded and fail to recognize parts of our life that are significant and were important to us. Gus does not. He is thankful for what he has and enjoys life with a heart that enjoys sharing.

That is what he has done with this book; he shares. In his sharing, he takes a reader on a tumultuous journey. His recollections of youth took me back to my childhood. As you see his love of his hockey team you will recall your infatuation with a team as you grew up. In my case, his writing triggered a surge of memories of growing up with the Pittsburgh Pirates and Roberto Clemente. I felt triumph with them, and in Clemente's case, tragedy. Still today, the mention of Roberto's name creates a hollow ache inside of me. A reference to the limousine accident does the same to a Red Wings fan.

It is that tragic June day, however, that inspired this book. Through that horrible event, Gus has found small gems of wisdom, to which even a non-sports fan can relate. He has derived beauty from an unusual place: catastrophe. His task was not easy, but his soul searching has produced something special. I know how difficult this was for Gus to write, because I am lucky enough to be able to call Gus Mollasis a friend. A better friend no man could ask for. I cherish both the opportunities he gave me to help him with this project and his friendship. We had discussions throughout the book's birth and its maturation, which at times proved painful to him. I have watched games with him and witnessed first-hand his fanaticism for his beloved Red Wings. At times I feared I would have to call 911, but thankfully he and his Wings always seem to recover.

Humor too, plays a part in Gus' saga. His contagious laughter he inherited from his lovely mother, Freda, is seen in these pages as well. You can't help enjoying the pilgrimage he takes you on. His trek is one that you will wish you were there for. As far as I'm concerned, this work is a must read for a fan of life.

It is hoped that somehow this book can encourage others and awaken feelings in people to thank both God and family. Also it is especially hoped that <u>On a Wing and a Prayer</u> might bring solace to the hearts of the fans of the Detroit Red Wings and inspiration to the fallen Wings.

Get well, Vladdie and Sergei. Our prayers and thoughts are with you and your families as you strive to fly again.

THE BEGINNINGS

Born of a Special Faith....to Be a Wings Fan

...the beginnings...

When I was growing up I guess I was like most kids. I tried to avoid homework any chance I could, and I played a lot. And when I played, I played hard and I played to win. I hated to lose to anybody and I played with everybody. I played with my sister, my friends and even my mom and dad. When I wasn't playing baseball on the sandlots, football on the playgrounds or hockey in the streets, then more times than not you could find me following the teams of my youth. Growing up in Detroit, I followed the Lions, Tigers and Red Wings. Oh my, what a time it was. Al Kaline was making great plays in right field for the Tigers, Gordie Howe was scoring pretty goals on the right wing for the Red Wings, and Lem Barney was running back kicks right up the center of the field for the Detroit Lions. I was pretty lucky to grow up in that era. I didn't know it then, but I really appreciate it now. And while the teams of my youth didn't always win, (they actually lost more often than not), I still followed them with all my heart and soul. No matter how many times they all let me down, I remained loyal. I always had hope, and although it was tough, I always kept the faith. I believed in them and that maybe someday the heroes of my youth would stand in the winners' circle. More times than not the Detroit teams disappointed me. Sometimes they even made me cry. Still I believed that they could win and that they would win. And once in a while they actually did win. Once in a while.

In 1968, I was six years old and the Detroit Tigers spoiled me and won it all with a miraculous come-from-behind victory. Down three games to one to the mighty St. Louis Cardinals, the Tigers stormed back against all odds to win their first championship in 23 years. I was a little kid then, and didn't know too much about suffering and things like loyalty, or testing one's faith. I just knew that Norm Cash was the neatest first baseman, Mickey Lolich had a great curve ball, and the Detroit Tigers, my Detroit Tigers, were the champions of the world. It was an unbelievable scene to take in as a youth. I thought it was my birthright, and I actually believed that the Tigers would win every year. I didn't know it then, but I would have to wait until I was 22 years old, for the 1984 Tigers, to taste victory again. I'll never forget Gibby's homer off the Goose. I was there, kneeling in a puddle of beer behind home plate, my obstructed view ticket tucked safely in my back pocket, as I watched that mammoth shot disappear into the upper deck. What a memory!

During that same time period, the late sixties, seventies and eighties I followed the Lions with much of the same fanfare. They, however, never produced anything that even resembled a championship team. Still every Sunday, I watched the games with the hope that maybe someday they could get to the Super Bowl. If one game summed up the frustration of being a Detroit Lions fan, it was the day that Tom Dempsey kicked a 63yard field goal to beat the Lions. I remember watching that game with my dad. I still can't believe he made that kick. Oh yes, the other highlight that sticks out in my mind is that picture of the Lions head coach Monte Clark praying on the sideline for an Eddie Murray field goal that would have beat the San Francisco 49ers in a playoff game. The kick sailed wide. It seemed like they always did. Time has passed, and largely because the Lions never could, they still haven't reached the big game. It is 1998 and I'm 35 now. The Lions, Barry Sanders and I are all running out of time. I really want them to win it for Barry. He deserves to be called a champion in the same way that Stevie Yzerman always deserved to be called a champion.

Ahhh!The Detroit Red Wings. Just saying the name gives me chills. Gordie Howe. Mr. Hockey. That beautiful red and white jersey with that unique winged-wheel. I've always had a love affair with the Red Wings. And while it is beautiful to be in love, it is also a time that you are most vulnerable. It is a time that you can feel euphoria and be the happiest person in the world, and it is also the time that you can be hurt the most. Let me tell you, I loved the Detroit Red Wings with all my heart. And for most of the years of my life, I loved them with a broken heart. More times than not, the Red Wings hurt me. Hurt me bad. They didn't mean to but they did. Still, I remained loyal over the many long and suffering years.

As a small child I remember going to the Olympia on Grand River to watch our Wings many times. One night in particular, I remember going to a game against the Boston Bruins with my Uncle Pierre and being speechless when he introduced me to Alex Delvecchio. Meeting my hero, the great number 10. What a thrill! I guess you could say I have been a Detroit Red Wings hockey fan for the better part of my life. In fact, being a Detroit Red Wings fan has been one of the better parts of my life. Even with all the losing and heartbreak, I kept the faith and made a promise. I promised myself that if they ever got to the Stanley Cup Finals, I would be there to see them raise the Cup. Years would fly by, and I never did get

to see the Wings raise the Cup when I was a kid; or a teenager; or when I turned 21; or even when I hit the magic 3-0. It seemed like I wasn't ever going to see that special moment

Stevie Yzerman came on the scene and was named captain of the Red Wings, and again there was hope. Yet, over many more long and agonizing years, something would always happen and the Wings never did reach their goal. Worse than that, Stevie was getting older. We all were. It seemed like the clock was running out on a life-long dream for all of us. In 1995, I expected that the Wings would win. They didn't. In 1996, I predicted it. Wrong again. In 1997, I still had hope that they could do it, but I really didn't think they would win it. Not really. But I did notice that something strange was starting to happen. The less that I expected them to win it, the more I realized that they could win it. All along, I kept hoping. I kept praying. And strangely, as if by some miracle, the Wings kept winning.

I celebrated my 35th birthday in Sarasota, Florida, away from my hometown of hockey town, and watched with hope as the Wings flew higher and faster through each round of the playoffs. While I couldn't believe what was actually happening, I did realize the inevitable. The Wings were going to win the Stanley Cup! After dousing myself with some smelling salts and armed with this new-found wisdom, I decided to give myself a present and take myself up on my promise. I would fly to Detroit and see the Wings win the Stanley Cup. I had to be there for their moment. It was their time. It was the fans' time. It was my time. And it was about time for me to embark on a journey that I had to take. It was a journey that had a destination in mind but a journey that had no guarantees. It sounded a lot like the game of life. Some things have changed for me as I've traveled the journey that makes up the middle chapters of my life. Now in adulthood, I play a little less, pray a little more, and try to deal with the victories and defeats in the game of my life with more grace and dignity than I did when I was younger. And believe me, while I didn't know exactly what to expect from this upcoming game, I was ready and willing to take the trip back home to find out. No matter what happened.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

...some background...

Growing up a Wings fan has always been bittersweet. For the most part, the good teams were few and far between, but the memories were priceless. Through the years, I've lived and died with them, and laughed and cried with them as they've had their array of great moments, moments of comic relief, and moments of pure grief.

When I was about 8, my family gave me an autographed hockey stick from the early 1970s Red Wings. Gordie Howe, Alex Delvecchio, Mickey Redmond and all the cool players had signed my stick. As a thank-you I played floor hockey in my basement with my friends and my sister until the names were worn off. I was just a stupid kid having some fun ruining a valuable stick and creating priceless memories. I would imitate the Wings to the radio calls of Budd Lynch and Bruce Martyn as I pretended to skate around the basement as Marcel Dionne or Henry Boucha while my little sister did her best to portray Jimmy Rutherford in a makeshift net. Unlike some goalies, she was a great playoff goaltender. She had a good glove hand, and you could never beat her with a long slap shot.

So many teams, so many memories. The Harkness or ("darkness") years. Gordie Howe playing with his sons at Olympia. The Wings beating the Flames on a pretty goal by Bill Lochead. All the bad teams with one goal in mind. I remember: Nick Libbet, Frank and Peter Mahovlich, Gary Bergman, Roger Crozier, Dennis Polonich, Danny Grant, Greg Stefan, John Ogrodnick, Gerard Galant and Shawn Burr, to name a few. All the bad trades. How about Gary Unger for Red Berenson? How about Adam Oates for Bernie Federko? Aggressive hockey is back in Town! Where have you gone, Ted Lindsay? A city turns its hungry eyes to you. Geez, I mean cheese, the pizza guy buys the team and drafts a kid named Yzerman. Stevie is great, but can they win? Jacques Demers arrives, talks funny, is inspirational and stresses that they have to play with "ENTOOSIASM." Hey maybe this team can win. If we get a couple of breaks, then sure they can beat GRETZKY. Whoops, Stevie hurts his knee and it looks bad. Another roadblock. A bunch of players get drunk the night before a playoff game, and once again the Wings blow their chance for greatness as the city of Detroit suffers a large hangover. Jacques takes us close a couple of times, but not close enough. See ya,

Jacques, it was nice knowing you. Your players have lost their "ENTOOSIASM" for you.

Hello, Scotty. Hello, Russian Five. Who are these guys? Sergei, Vladdie, Slava, Vyacheslav and Igor, we're not supposed to like you, but we do. The heavily favored Wings lose a heartbreaker to San Jose. Still not ready. It made me sick, and I was thankful Greek Orthodox Easter was that night. Prayer helped me through. The finals and Jersey. We're better than these guys. Why can't we beat them? What happened? Swept. How disgusting. I got sick to my stomach. As I watched from the *Sports Page*, my favorite neighborhood watering hole in Sarasota, I know that this is a cliche, but I did, I really did cry in my beer. Make that cried in many beers. In time, the pain went away, because there was always next year.

I caught them in Tampa. Hey, these guys look really good I thought. Fast, sharp, poised, confident. Maybe this year they can do it! No, don't say it, I don't want to jinx them. Sixty-two wins sets the record for most in a season. Awesome! They're ready for the playoffs. Stevie scores in OT against GRETZKY and St. Louis. This might be the year. WRONG! An Avalanche arrives. Who are these guys? We creamed them in the regular season. Coffey scores a hat trick, including one in the wrong net. A bad sign. Draper's face in the boards, courtesy of Claude. This isn't pretty. They lost again. I cried again. We were starting to establish a pattern here, and a very bad one.

Off season moves. Dino Ciccarelli goes to Tampa Bay. Keith Primeau can't drive 55, so he's expendable, too. Scotty is sick of Coffey and would prefer an Irish drink called a Shanahan, a Murphy and a McCarty. Sergei is on defense? Maybe Scotty's finally lost it. Who's in net? Osgood is GOOD, but VERNON is the MAN. Revenge! Hello, CLAUDE, goodbye, bad memories. Wings win in OT! Revenge is best served cold and on home ice. MARCH 26th. Colorado can be beat! Happy trails to you until we meet again.

The Wings play out the string. They are not favorites. Maybe they can win, maybe they can't win the Cup. For me, as always, they have a chance. But heck, I thought they could win with Eddie Giacomin in goal, Greg Joly on the blue line, and Dennis Hextall at center. Still, I had the feeling. One voice kept saying, "Hey, Gus, this is the year." Another voice told me, "Shut up, you idiot." Still, I kept listening, I kept hoping, and yes, I kept praying.

True Fans Have the Pain, Faith and Stories

...a goal...

Most true Red Wings fans can relate to what I'm saying. I'm not talking about the casual fan or the fan who now finds it fashionable to root for the team when the going gets good. I'm talking about the true Red Wings fan who has been tested and has passed every test along the way by supporting his or her team through the good and the bad.

To be a true Red Wings fan, you have to suffer through the pain and still keep your chin up. You have to be loyal and stick by your team no matter what. To be a Wings fan, you have to be an optimist. Yes, my friends, if you are a Red Wings fan, the Stanley Cup is always half full and it is always within reach. Being a Red Wings fan has always been about hope. I hope they can do it. I hope they can score. I hope that they win the Cup for Stevie. I hope they can repeat as champions. And now because of that terrible accident on June 13th, 1997 in which Vladimir Konstantinov and Sergei Mnatsakanov were seriously injured, being a Red Wings fan is about hoping, praying and believing. The goal is not about hoping that they score one late to win, and the save we want is not one that keeps the game tied. The GOAL IS THIS AND THIS ALONE. The goal is for fallen Wings to be saved. And if we all stay together and pray together, then perhaps we can accomplish something together far more important than winning and celebrating the Stanley Cup victory. If we have faith, then perhaps Vladdie and Sergei will be restored to health. Imagine what kind of parade we could have then! One even more meaningful. Can it happen? Sure it can. If you are a true Red Wings fan all things are possible. If we have faith, if we have hope, if we believe, then we can get through this thing together on a wing and prayer.

What follows is my journey, my flight if you will, with our Wings, through the triumphant and tragic run of 1997 and subsequent return to glory in 1998. You're invited to take the journey with me. It was a wild trip over a time in which we all won so much, felt so much, grew so much and were in danger of losing so much. The years were filled with tears of joy and moments of pain. And from this journey, perhaps we have all learned that life is not only about the games that we play, but it is also, more importantly, about the power that we all have when we pray.

March 26, 1997... the Lights Go out, the Wings Wake up and the Power is Restored

...some history...

I hustled home as fast as I could. The Wings were playing the Avalanche, and I knew that it would be a special game. The game was on *ESPN*, and I was ready for a little revenge. The game started out the way most "Lanche"/Wings games had been going lately, with Colorado dominating play.

As I watched in my condo, transfixed to the action, I bit into a pretzel and attempted to wash down the bitterness of the play on the tube with a beer. Then it happened. Zap...Boom...the lights, the TV and all the power in my neighborhood went out. A blackout. This couldn't be happening. Not now. The TV Guide said the game may be blacked out in the Detroit area. It said nothing about Sarasota.

Sitting there still in my gym sweats, I wasn't left with much of a choice. I could sit there and hope the power would go on or I could hustle to the neighborhood bar and watch the rest of the game. I showered by candlelight and then hustled to *Livingstone's* and asked the bartender to turn on my game.

I picked up the game in the third period and the Wings were still down two goals. Then something happened. The Wings scored a goal and then another to tie it at 5-5. Overtime. The Wings had awakened. They were alive and well. They were battling like champions. They were winning the battles in the corners, beating the Avalanche to the puck and making all the smart plays that champions make.

Then in overtime, as he had done earlier in the game, Darren McCarty delivered the knockout blow and turned the lights out on the Avalanche with a game-winning goal. The goal not only won a hockey game, but more importantly, it restored the power to the Red Wings. A power and confidence that had been missing all season long up to that point. This night changed things. On March 26th, one sleeping giant awoke from a long season's nap while another giant went to sleep and undoubtedly had some nightmares. I felt no pity or sympathy for Colorado. I only felt happiness and relief that both the Red Wings and I could once again see the light.

I Couldn't Skate, So I Played in the Streets

...a flashback...

I was born in 1962, seven years after the 1955 season, the magical year that the good guys in red last won the Stanley Cup. The name on my birth certificate was Constantine, but I took *Constantine off* and went with Gus. It was a little hard back then trying to play street hockey with my friends and remain tough with the name Constantine. Recently, I've learned otherwise. You can be cool and tough and have the name Konstantinov as your name. Thanks, Vladdie for opening my eyes.

When I was a kid growing up in South Redford, Michigan, in the late sixties and early seventies, hockey was not only popular in the big rinks like Olympia, but the game also thrived in the many local rinks where kids would play as peewees and midgets. Many of my friends played ice hockey at the Redford arena. I, unfortunately, was not one of them, because I couldn't skate.

Still I enjoyed the game and played street hockey any chance I could with the buddies of my youth, Craig Thompson, David Darany, Danny Korovesis, Aristotle Constant and many others. We would play after school in many spirited games on brisk fall and winter afternoons on the street where Craig lived. Oh, what a time! We played until it got dark and sometimes even later. Seems just like yesterday.

Later on when I went to high school, I always pushed, actually begged, that one side of the gym be opened for floor hockey. We played our hearts out. And again, Craig and I formed a pair on a three-man team. Linemates for life it seemed. I remember playing so hard that I would get an asthma attack. It didn't matter. I loved the game that much. So did Craig. I miss those days and I miss those guys. I lost track of most of them, but I remember all of them. Especially Craig. He was a leader. He looked a little like Troy Aikman and all the girls liked him. He was a good pal. Sadly, one year after high school, Craig was killed in a tragic accident. I still think about him a lot, and my mind always seems to wander back to those great pick-up hockey games that we played.

It was such a simple time back then. There were no computers, no Internet, no cable, no Nintendo, and no videos. We just had some sticks, a puck

and a couple of nets, and most importantly, we had each other. We were just a bunch of kids who happened to be friends and who enjoyed shooting pucks at each other. It doesn't get much better than that. What I wouldn't give to have a game with them all right now. When I go back home, I drive down that street. There aren't kids playing street hockey there anymore, or at least I haven't seen them. But once in a while, if I listen hard enough I can still hear the joy and laughter and the sound of pucks flying in the street.

A Devil Fan Becomes a Friend and I Score a Hat Trick

...a friendship...

When I moved down to Sarasota, one of the things that I missed the most was the Detroit Red Wings. I still was able to catch the Lions every Sunday at the *Sports Page*, but I was having serious hockey withdrawal. In 1995, when they reached the playoffs I was in Detroit for some of the games, but eventually I had to fly back to Sarasota for business and the finals. We all know what happened to that series. The heavily favored Wings were swept with four short sweeps of a broom, as the New Jersey Devils outhit, outscored and outhustled the Wings in every way possible. I guess in the end, they just wanted it more. The result was a Stanley Cup for the Devils and more weeping for the Red Wings and their fans.

Shortly thereafter, I met a gentlemen named Don Weeks, who happened to be a big Devils fan and who also just happened to be a Baptist pastor. As his Realtor, I showed him around town as he and his wife, Phyllis, looked for their perfect home. Eventually, they found it, and we became good friends. Between all the kidding and jibes, our relationship grew. "How can you be a man of the cloth and root for the Devils?" I would say. He would respond with, "How can you root for a team that has let you down so much?" The shots were different, but we both rooted for our team for the same reasons. We had hope, we were loyal and we had faith in our team. It was something we both had to do. So it meant a lot to me this past January 1997, when Pastor Don gave me a Red Wings hat as a present. "Keep the faith," he said, as he handed the hat to me. It was probably the "greatest hat trick" I'd ever seen and surely the one that I will remember and cherish the most.

60 Wings from Hooters..No, I'll Take 55 for the Same Price

...the party...

I watched alone as the Wings disposed of the Blues in game six of the first round of the '97 playoffs. They looked determined and focused. Round two brought on the Anaheim Mighty Ducks. The Anaheim series was fun as I ducked into a bar to catch the Wings win in OT. I jumped for joy as people in the bar looked at me as if I had flown over the cuckoo's nest. I didn't care. I was starting to get that feeling. Staying up late for game four reminded me of when I was a kid and I would listen to all those games from the West Coast, the radio securely tucked under my pillow as Bruce Martyn and Budd Lynch soothed me to sleep with their masterful calls. Many times I'd have to read the Detroit Free Press or Detroit News the next morning to find out what happened. Sometimes my dad would leave me a note, "Gary Unger scored late, they won." If there was no note, I knew they lost, Well, for game four against the Ducks, I wasn't going to take any chances and hope for any notes. I was going to stay up with the Wings even if it took all night. It almost did. Finally, Shanny scored and tucked us all in for the night, as he threw the Duck defenseman out of the crease the way a restless sleeper tosses away unwanted blankets. That night I slept like a kid who knew what the note would say the next day.

Bring on the "Lanche"! God, I hated it when people would call them that. The "Lanche," the "Lanche." I could picture Mr. Howell from "Gilligan's Island" saying, "Lovvie, did you get the 'Lanche' tickets?" Deserted on my island of paradise without the comfort of a Mary Ann or a Ginger, I hoped that the Wings could rescue me from this hot weather with their cool play. I thought they were ready. They looked determined and had ice in their veins. In game one, the Wings outplayed them badly and still lost. It couldn't be happening again, I thought, I didn't sleep well that night. Game 2 was also miserable, until Igor and the Captain turned it around with clutch goals. Stevie's goal seemed big and special at the time, and propelled the Wings to a memorable victory. I watched that game on tape over and over as they scored four unanswered goals against the "Lanche." I still love to see Claude Lemiuex's expression after the game. Hey Lovvie pass me a beer. I think the "Lanche" are lunch. I knew they would be okay for games 3 and 4 at the Joe. They proved me right. As I watched, the temperature outside was a cool 90 degrees, just perfect for melting ice. Game 5 took me to the Sports Page and a heavy dose of Molson Ice. The "Lanche" woke up

1.1

and beat the Wings bad 6-0. I only hoped that the Wings would have their alarms set for Game 6.

I went to *Hooters*, that famous Florida restaurant that has beautiful women working there, most of whom resemble *Ginger or Mary Ann*. I ordered 55 wings for a small get-together I was having with my friends. Betsy, the girl from *Hooters*, told me that they came in orders of 60. I told her to give me 55 wings and charge me for 60. I had to have 55. She made me explain the significance of ordering 55 hot wings. "The last time the Red Wings won the cup was 1955," I said with conviction. She acted like she understood, but I knew that she didn't. Some people never will understand that sometimes it doesn't matter what you pay for your Wings. What is important, though, is that you get to enjoy them. On this night, the Detroit Red Wings never played better, and the *Hooters* wings never tasted better. I told my pal, "Hey, Ruffie, these wings are hot." "No they're perfect," he said. "Yes, you're right, my friend, they are perfect, and you know what, they're going to the Stanley Cup Finals."

II. THE JOURNEY

I Had to Be There In Detroit

...the plan...

For the most part I watched the hockey playoffs alone from my condo in Sarasota. The reason was simple. I couldn't control myself, and my language got horrible, especially when they were playing Colorado and that S.O.B. Lemiuex. Sorry, see what I mean? And this was supposed to be a spiritual journey. Anyway, you get my point. I couldn't watch it with people, so I stayed home and watched alone and made my Detroit calls during the game to family and friends. The calls came and went and as the Wings soared and scored. "Hey, Mom are you taping the 'Hockey Night in Canada' broadcast?" "I have to have Don Cherry's comments." "That was a lousy call on Draper; God, I hate that damn Lemiuex. He really gets on my nerves." "Did you see the hit by Vladdie?" "Yes, great goal by the Captain. That could turn it around." "Great save Mikie!" With each call I made, I realized the inevitable: that long distance conversations get costly and that being there is better than calling long distance.

So, as I watched our Red Wings dismantle the Philadelphia Flyers in Game 3, the way a fat guy from Philly devours a steak and cheese, and the same way a Detroiter devours a Coney Island hot dog, my head realized what my heart knew all along. I had to go home and see the Captain raise the Cup. As the clock counted down and the Wings applied their "choke hold" on the series, I would make only two more calls. One to my travel agent and one to my mom, Freda, whom I was now affectionately referring to as FREDAROV."

"Wanda, what's the best rate I can get on a flight from Tampa to Detroit?" I asked the travel agent with hope. "Hey, Gus, you're in luck, \$91 from Tampa, but it leaves at 6:00 a.m. Saturday," she said. "Wanda, book it, I'm there." What was there to think about? 91 bucks? Hell, that's Fedorov's number. That's a no-brainer. The only thing I had to do now was call my mom, Fredarov and tell her I was on my way. "Hello, Mom, I'm coming home. Ask Cle (my sister) and Baba (Dad, in Greek) to work on getting me a ticket."

Plane and Simple...The Cup and I Are Coming Home

...the journey...

On the plane I sat in row 42, seat F. This was starting to get scary. I was no math major, nor a psychic hotline caller. Sorry, Dionne Warwick, but I know the way to Detroit, and even I could put 4 and 2 together. Hey, that's how long it had been since the Wings won the Stanley Cup. Forty-two years. We were starting to develop a pattern here and a good one at that. I felt at ease sitting up in the clouds and looking over the wings of the plane. Everything felt right. I was glad that I was on my way to Detroit. I was happy to be making the long journey home to see my family, friends and my Wings.

The atmosphere on the plane was serene. Almost peaceful. I am not a comfortable flyer. I am a nervous flyer. Not "Terry Murray" nervous or "Ron Hextall" nervous, but nervous nevertheless. The flight was great as other transplanted Wings fans were migrating home from all over the States to get to or near the Joe Louis Arena and their home nest in Detroit.

The couple from Lakeland was "chirping" about how they paid \$2,000 to a travel agent for seats at the Joe." They were happy to have the tickets, and to quote Colorado's Patrick Roy, "They were willing to pay the price." I asked various people on the plane if they had tickets. I figured I'd take a shot and do my shopping in a hopefully undercover, cop-free environment. But nothing turned up on the plane other than some good conversation. The excitement and anticipation for a wonderful evening was starting to build.

As we made the approach to Metro, the skies were bright and sunny and the landing was flawless, much like the Wings' performance throughout the entire playoffs. Oh, sure, there were a couple bumps along the way. After all, the runway is in Detroit and it has its share of potholes. But you have to have faith in a greater power and you must always believe and trust the pilot and Captain. After all, these guys earn their wings every day. For all I knew these guys in the cockpit were probably named Stevie and Scotty. As we landed, I prayed like I always do, and as I walked off the plane, a passenger told the pilot and captain, "Thanks for getting us to the Joe." I thanked them also, but not completely. I saved some of my thanks for a higher power in the front office. No, not Mr. Ilitch... but the guy we both pray to.

Prayer, the Playoffs and the Payoffs

...Reflections...

Prayer...it's all about faith and hope. It doesn't make sense empirically, but then again so much of life doesn't. Life is like a game but one that can't be analyzed concisely in a box score. Sometimes there are no answers in life. No good short reasons as to why we win and why we lose. Prayer for me (and maybe for you) is a way to sort it all out. It provides comfort, peace, and, of course, hope. Sometimes that's all any of us has and all any of us needs. Of course, prayer is about miracles. To quote Al Michaels, who called the miracle win of team USA over the heavily favored, Fetisov-led Soviet team in the 1980 Olympics, "Do you believe in miracles"?

Well, let me tell you, I believe in miracles. I pray at home, and I pray at church. And many times, my prayers have been answered. You see, miracles do happen. You just have to apply for them. Sometimes you need a miracle to win the big game and sometimes it takes a miracle just to get into the big game.

As the 1997 playoffs started, I was in church during Palm Sunday at St. Barbara's Greek Orthodox Church in Sarasota. Greek Easter was late that year. As I went up to Father Frank to receive my Palm, I spoke to Nicholas, a chanter in the church who is an avid Montreal Canadiens hockey fan. You could say that he plays on Father Frank's right wing. "Nicholas...good luck to your Canadiens," I said. "Thanks, Gus, good luck and God bless your Wings." With that he handed me another palm - "Here, this might help your Wings."

I thanked him and left the church. That evening I placed the two palms on the mirror of my bedroom dresser. There they would remain throughout the playoffs, two palms in the shape of a cross; two palms that looked like wings, a left and a right one. All through the playoffs I would look to them for comfort, I would look to them for hope and, of course, when I got on the plane and headed home to Detroit, they were in my jeans' pockets. One palm in the left pocket and one in my right pocket. They were my wings...and they were all I needed.

The Motown Sound ...Hey... Hey....Hey

... the arrival...

My brother-in-law Dragan, was born in Serbia. And as far as I know the closest thing to *Hockey Night in Serbia*, is when the Bosnians and Serbs get together in the winter to discuss a cease-fire, which simply means they put their sticks down and stop shooting on each other's net. It is one rivalry that makes the Colorado/Detroit series look like something out of the peewee leagues. Dragan is now an enthusiastic Red Wings fan. He picked me up from the airport, in his Red (wing) Convertible. All the way home from the airport he played much of the music that is heard at the Joe; Gary Glitter's "Rock and Roll Part II,"...which people know as the "Hey" song; the "Whoomp! there it is" song; and the other great sports songs that get any crowd going. The music sounded great.

I was excited to be home. Tired but excited. On the way home, I was starting to formulate my plan on getting tickets. I would call the guys in the paper first and see how the law of supply and demand would play out. My hunch was that the greedy scalpers would have to dump their tickets for a lower price as game time approached. "Hey, Dragan, did you get your brother-in-law a ticket?" I joked. He gave me a smile and a look, "Hey, brother, everything has its price." We both laughed. Then I told him I was willing to pay up to \$1,000 for a ticket. "Let's see what kind of leads Cle has on tickets. Did you see that hit that Vladdie put on that guy in Game 3?" he asked. "Hell, see it, I felt it," I said. Dragan was beaming. "I must break you," Dragan shouted in an Arnold-type voice. "Vladdie is tough, the toughest defenseman in the league," I countered, as we turned into the driveway. "My favorite player," Dragan chimed in as we removed my bags from the car. Hockey fever had captured my Serbian brother-in law big time. Motown had truly turned into Hockeytown, and I was glad to be there...to take in all the sights and sounds. To borrow a couple of verses from Gary Glitter's "Rock and Roll" anthem: "..Hey...Hey... Hey...Hey..." Everything was in perfect harmony.

Tickets...Wait and See and an Offer You Can Refuse

...The search...

When we were growing up, my sister Cle was our connection to the best seats in town for concerts. She always found us great seats for a decent price. But today it was about noon on game day. I was faced with a daunting task to say the least. She greeted me with a warm hug and handed me a sheet of paper with some names on it. "I've used this guy Pat for Bob Seger tickets and this other guy might have some standing-room-only for about 750 bucks." With that she handed me some classified ads. "I've called up some of these guys, Give them a shot."

I quickly scanned the numerous newspaper ads for the "best prices in town." My first call was to Pat. "Hey Pat, Do you have any SRO? (standing-room-only seats). "Nothing now," he replied, "but I think I can get one." How much are you willing to pay?," he shot back. "\$700, \$800 bucks," I said, hardly believing that those numbers were coming out of my mouth. "Okay I'll be in touch," he said.

I called a number of other places. "Yes, we have them; lower bowl for \$2,000 bucks; yeah, we got them; \$1500 for upper bowl." "Is that for a pair?," I asked naively. "Are you kidding," was followed with a quick hang up of the phone. As I made each call, I become more unsure, more confused, and less focused. It was quite overwhelming. I was running on little sleep and these guys were talking numbers that made me dizzy. I wanted to go to the game, but I didn't want to give up my firstborn. I started to think that maybe I was being a bit unrealistic in my quest for a ticket at a good price. Heck, I didn't even know what a good price was anymore. I started to grow empathy for the Flyers. They wanted to go to the game, too, but like them, I was starting to feel like I was out of the Red Wings league.

I needed to get organized and change things. Maybe change phones, like Terry Murray changed goaltenders. Yeah, that might help. Maybe my luck would change if I went over to my mom's and dad's house to make the calls. Heck, it can't hurt. I dialed up some more of these "legal scalpers." It was now about 2:00 p.m. and the clock was starting to count down on me, and unlike the Flyers, I didn't have the ability to ice the puck and stop the clock from ticking.

A quick call to Dino in Greektown provided some hope. There were Flyers fans who had tickets and who had come into his restaurant. They didn't care to witness the inevitable and they were willing to sell them. "Yeah, Dino, put her on the phone," I said with hope. "Hello, Sandra, You have seats, where are they and how much?" "Well, we want \$2000 for the pair, but we could get more. We just want to get out of here. We don't want to be here and watch the celebration. It'll make me sick," she said in a hollow voice. I could feel for her predicament and I tried to feel her pain, but I've been there and done that and I liked my position better than hers. I offered her \$1200 for the pair. Maybe I could surprise my dad with a ticket. I made her an offer that I thought she couldn't refuse. She promptly showed me she was no fan of The Godfather and turned down my offer but promised to get back with me if her position changed. Needless to say, she never called back. Apparently both she and her tickets disappeared. I couldn't help but think of this faceless stranger getting off a plane with her Flyers jersey on and catching a glimpse of the Wings celebration on a multitude of TVs in the Philadelphia airport. It brought a smile to my face.

No, Not George, 1 Can't Be George Costanza!

...the fear...

Making a deal was one thing, but what the heck was going on? With each phone call that I made it was getting later and later and I still was unable to find any skating room let alone score a ticket for a good price. Ah, finally Pat called back, maybe some good news. "\$1,200 for one way up in the upper bowl," he said. "Are you kidding? Don't you have anything else?," I pleaded. "I'll call you back," he promised. This was getting crazy, Cup crazy. I was starting to have my doubts. What had I gotten myself into? My theory of the ticket prices going down toward game time seemed stupid now. Nevertheless, I was shaken, but I continued to stay relatively calm in the pursuit of the goal. I had to get a ticket to watch Stevie skate around with the Cup. Hell, I didn't even have to see the game, but I had to see Stevie hoist the Cup. He deserved it, and I had to be there to see him do it.

I began to talk to myself. "All right, Gus, stay focused." It was now 3:00 and getting later. I still had no ticket. I had to make some more calls. "Do you have any?" "Sorry, we're sold out." "Sorry, we're sold out." "We're out." "Just sold the last one." A pattern was starting to develop, and it wasn't a good one.

Plan B. In my mind I told myself that if I couldn't get tickets through the paper during the afternoon, then I would go down to the arena and take a chance with scalpers. But to be honest, I was afraid of this option and quite frankly a little neurotic at the thought. I'm not talking Marc Crawford neurotic, that "calm" coach of the hated Avalanche, I'm talking George Costanza neurotic. I could just see it now. I'm sitting in front of Joe Louis arena and I hand the guy the \$1,000 for the ticket. He handcuffs me, takes my money then throws me in jail. I lose the money and miss the game. It sounds like a George Costanza thing. Tell me you couldn't see that on Seinfeld next season (if there were to have been a next season). One thing is for sure; I didn't want to see it tonight. I could not afford to be George or have a George-like thing happen to me. Before I made anymore scalper calls I had to call my cousin Erica, who is an attorney, and ask for her advice. "Hey, Erica, does the scalper get in trouble, or do both the buyer and the scalper get fined?" After her reply, "Let me look it up and I'll get back with you," I was back to my calls.

I was bleary eyed, but I kept dialing. I took my best shots and still I couldn't seem to find any good opportunities at scoring any tickets. My dad was now in on the pursuit. "Hey, let's both go," I said. "Gus, I can't take the crowd. You go, you'll enjoy it better." "Okay Dad." "Dino was thinking about going, maybe I'll go with him. Let me see if he wants to go for sure." "Hey, Dino, you want to go, right?" "Yeah," he said hesitating a bit, "but I don't want to spend 1,200 bucks." "Okay, then what's your limit,?" I shot back. "\$700, \$800," he countered. "Dino, I don't think that's going to get it done." "Well, we'll keep trying though. Stay in touch."

Just then, the phone rang. It was Pat. "I can get two at \$900 each, do you want them?" "Hey, Pat, let me call you right back," I begged. "All right, hurry though, they won't last." Click. I dialed Dino's restaurant, the Plaka in Greektown. "Dino, I can get a pair for \$1,800 do you want to go?" I asked. "Gus, that's a bit high for me. You know what, you go and I'll try to get you a ticket. I don't think I can get away from the restaurant, it's crazy down here," he shouted over the roar of a packed restaurant. "Okay, so you're out?" I asked again. "Sorry. Yeah, I'm out." Click. I dialed Pat's number thinking I'd get the tickets and go with my sister, Cle. "Hello, Pat I'll take them," I said. "Sorry, Gus, they're gone. You waited too long," he said, actually sounding like he was sorry. "Anything else," I said as my hopes were starting to fade. "Might have one, I'll call you." Time was running out. It was now about 4:00 p.m. I hurried to the ATM for more cash. Now I had the money but still had no ticket.

What Price...Memories?

...the questions...

I kept asking myself, "Gus, what's it worth to you?" I always believed that if there is a will there is a way. Sure, I believed in that old saying but it always helps if you have a little more cash. I was now preparing to spend about \$1,000 for a ticket. But was I really? That's a lot of money. It was now 5 o'clock, less than three hours till game time. I made some more calls. Nothing. I started to get recorded messages telling me that they were all sold out, but if there was a Game 5 and 6, then please call back. Were they kidding? Did anyone actually think the Wings wouldn't finish the job in Motown on Saturday night? Obviously they didn't talk to the Flyers fan that I spoke to. It was only a matter of time now. And for me, a matter of time, money and one other small detail, a ticket.

I called Pat back. "I just sold one, the last one, for a thousand bucks, I'm done for the night Gus. I tried to help you, I've got to go," he said coldly. "Pat, Pat, are you there?" I said desperately. "I have to go," he said. "If I were you I would head downtown now. It's your only shot." Click. What happened? I really dropped the puck. I had a chance for tickets, but I let them slip through my five-hole. My strategy was all wrong. Okay, I need to regroup. I need to get up and go where the action is. Downtown, Downtown, the lights were much brighter there. Let's hope that the tickets and not the undercover cops were going to be there, too.

A call from Erica, my attorney cousin, gave me some peace of mind. "They'll take your money" but they won't lock you up, unless they have a city ordinance, then I don't know." Thanks. I was willing to take my chances. I jumped in the shower, threw on a Red Wings T-shirt and flew out the door. My dad caught me at the door, "I have Vickie on the phone." "Hi, Gus, the cop friend of mine who was supposed to get you into the game got called in on scalper detail. They're really cracking down on that, so be careful and I'm really sorry I couldn't help you out." "That's all right, Vickie. Thanks for trying."

It was now almost 6:00 p.m., and it was getting later and later. My dad felt bad that he couldn't help me out. He began to insist on going downtown to help me get a ticket. I insisted that I was okay and could handle it. He gave me another few hundred dollars toward my ticket fund. I now had about

\$1,255 in my pocket, and I was heading down to where the action was. My mom, sister and dad all felt bad that I didn't have a ticket. As I left, I told them that everything would be all right and that I would call them from the game.

I was on my way. I had my aunt's Intrepid, a half a tank of gas, no radio, and a steering package that reminded me of the old K-cars, that engineering marvel that Mr. Ilitch used to give away at games as a promotion, when the Wings weren't such a hot ticket. Years ago, Chrysler's Mr. Iacocca used to say, "If you can find a better car, then buy it." Well, if I may, to paraphrase Lee, "If I can find any ticket, I'll buy it."

Greektown...Tickets....NOPA!

...the work...

Driving downtown, I had only the noise of the tires hitting the potholes to keep me company. My aunt's Intrepid had no radio. But quite frankly I didn't need one. My mind was racing as thoughts were going through my head at a mile a minute. "Where should I start to look for tickets?" "Where should I park?" "What about *Nemos? Lindel AC*, *The Post*?" This was my hometown, and while I knew all the roads, I still felt lost. I was looking for answers, and while the radio wasn't on, I was taking requests. Finally, it hit me. Go to Greektown, young man! Sure when you're in Rome, do as the Romans do. But when you're in Detroit, you do as the Greeks do. Yeah, that was good. I could park the car, search for tickets, pick up an octopus and a ticket at a decent price from one of the many restaurants and bars, and then hop on the People Mover.

The Greeks aren't big hockey fans, anyway. They like soccer. I thought it was a great plan, and one that I'm sure "Alexander the Great" would have been proud of. I parked my car at the Greek church on Monroe. It was the last spot in the lot, yet it was right up front. I took that as a good sign. I started to walk down Monroe, a street that I had walked down hundreds of times in my life. On this night for some reason it looked different. It wasn't the number of people, as there were many, that made it look different. It was a feeling in the air that made it feel different. Detroit it seemed, was ready to explode like one giant Saganaki (flaming cheese). The streets of Greektown were ready to yell "OPA" to the Red Wings. And I was glad I was right there in the middle of it, no tickets and all.

As I made my way through a maze of people, I stopped anybody who even remotely looked like a scalper. No luck. I stopped into the *Plaka Coney Island* to see Dino and his mom, Zina. "Hey, guys, anything?" I asked with hope. Just as quickly they dashed my hopes, "Sorry, Gus, we've been asking everybody, there just aren't any tickets." I continued to Trappers Alley, and offered a guy \$900 for a seat. He looked at me as if I were nuts. I asked again "Do you have a ticket or don't you? I don't have the time to BS. I have the money. Do you have the tickets or not?" "No, I don't have them," he said. I was out of there. I didn't have time to waste with some joker. Think, Gus, now what do you do? Greektown had great food but it was nowheresville for tickets. Got to go to the Joe right now. I went by the Plaka

to say bye to Zina, "Hey, Gus, honey do you want something to eat. How about a Saganaki?" she yelled. "*Nopa*, can't eat, I've got to get a seat." I yelled back as I headed for the People Mover and the Joe.

Need One...Who's Got One?

...the desperation...

Thinking out loud. "Where do I pick up the People Mover? Oh, over there. Man, is it crowded. That's good. Lots of Red Wings fans with lots of tickets. Surely, I could convince one of the more casual fans to sell me his ticket."You wouldn't by any chance want to sell your seat for \$700, \$800, or \$900 hundred dollars, would you?," I started my pitches. "Just think, you can watch the game on TV and have the \$800 that I gave you in your pocket?" My sale pitches were falling on deaf ears. No one was listening to me. I felt like I was a little kid at one of our family dinners. I was talking, but no one was listening, or at least it seemed like no one understood me. I was out of Greektown now, but these people all looked at me like I was speaking Greek to them. Sir, over here, I need a ticket: Do you want to sell one? Still no response. Was my microphone on? Were these people in a trance? Yes, that was it, they were in a trance. They had tickets and they were going to the cup-clinching game in a few moments. Everything was right in their world. It was I who was out of touch. I would have acted the same way if some desperate stranger was asking me for my ticket, an hour before game time of the night that Stevie would surely hoist the Cup. To these fans, all the money in the world couldn't have convinced them to sell their tickets. And quite frankly, I didn't have that kind of money. But perhaps my greatest concern, was that I was running out of the most precious commodity of all, time.

I got off the People Mover and instantly started asking anybody and everybody if they had a ticket. The steep steps around Joe Louis Arena were packed with people. There had to be one ticket in this mass of humanity with my name on it. "I need one, Who's got one?" I began to bark. "I need one. I need one. Who's got one? Anybody got one? I need one," I said in a rhythmic cadence. There were no responses. A pattern was starting to form, and it wasn't a good one. What was wrong with these people? Did these people think I was a cop? That was probably it. Let me try the other side, on the waterfront. I'll find people as they're coming over from Cobo Hall. Yeah, I'll have a better chance there. "Miss, do you want to sell me your ticket for \$1,000?" Her head snapped around, and like a walleye on a hook that I just pulled out of the Detroit River, I thought I had her. She looked at her friend for support and strength. "You want to go to the game, don't you? Think of Stevie, it's only money," her friend said. "No thanks" she said. I

countered, "\$1,100, come on, you can buy a lot of stuff for that kind of money." "Sorry," she said as she hustled up the steps to the promised land. I've been rejected by women many times before, but none of them hurt like this.

I started back toward the main entrance and noticed a *Detroit News* photographer. "Hey, buddy, how are you doing? I'm a friend of Cynthia Lambert, the hockey beat writer. Maybe you can get me in?" I said, while pointing to my photographer's bag all the while hoping that our mutual interests might help me click with this guy. "Sorry, buddy, can't do anything. Security is extremely tight and be very careful of the cops. They're coming down hard on scalpers," he shot back.

Needless to say, I felt deflated. Almost like when the Wings lost to the Sharks in '94, or the Devils in '95 or the Avalanche in '96. An empty, sick feeling was starting to come over me. It was hopelessness. The winds around the Joe Louis Arena were starting to blow harder. There was a chill in the air. I felt cold, and while I was with thousands of people, I felt alone. But worse than that, I didn't feel at home.

Ready to Give up... Maybe It's not Meant to Be

...the doubt...

The "hope" in my step was starting to fade. I started having my doubts about the whole trip. What was I thinking? Who was I kidding? Did I really think that I could pull this off? It was 25 minutes to game time. As I walked up the notoriously steep Joe Louis steps, I couldn't help but think of the irony. I've walked up these steps in the depth of winter and they were much easier to climb than they were now on this beautiful June night. I guess your footing is more sure when you have a ticket in your pocket.

I looked at the crowd who was milling about. I had stopped asking, "Who's got one?" I didn't believe anybody had a ticket with my name on it anymore. I looked at the people, all the happy people who had tickets and who were now entering the arena. I looked at them and I must admit I hated them. Every single one of them. They all had tickets and they were going to the game. What did I have but a wing and a prayer. I thought, "How can she be a bigger fan than I am?" Yes, I was jealous. But worse than the jealousy was the fact that I had lost hope. As I looked into the arena, I couldn't help but feel like an outsider. I felt like giving up. Maybe this was just one of those things that wasn't meant to be.

I backed up and went to a nearby wall to pause for a moment of reflection, prayer and resolution. I leaned on the wall for support as I watched the scene unfold in front of me. The bright Detroit summer sunlight was starting to go down. So were my dreams. The sun on the letters "Joe Louis Arena" looked brilliant. I took a snapshot in my mind and saved it with my camera.

I leaned back on the wall and took a deep breath. I thought, What did I do wrong? Could I have planned better? I was beginning to think of where I would watch the game on TV. Lindel AC, sure, I could go there. That would be cool. Then I thought, Jimmy B, (Jimmy Butsicaris the owner of the Lindel AC), God rest his soul, had passed away recently. It would not be the same. Just then I looked to the sky, toward God and I prayed, "You know, I really want to go to this game. If there is any way to get me in, show me the way." I felt like Jimmy Stewart in It's a Wonderful Life. The only difference was that I was hoping to get in to see my Wings. I was hoping and praying for a miracle and an angel. His name didn't even have to be

Clarence. Just then I noticed the guy with something in his hands. I wasn't sure, but they looked like tickets.

Are You a Cop? No,... Are You a Cop?

...the opportunity...

It was now 7:45 and game time was 15 minutes away. The guy I spotted didn't look special. He was a stocky guy wearing a Red Wings shirt. What stood out was his nervousness. While it wasn't terribly hot, I noticed that he was sweating. I also noticed that he seemed to be in deep thought. But what really caught my eye, were the pieces of paper that he had in his hand. They looked like hockey tickets. At least, I hoped they were hockey tickets. Maybe the sun was in my eyes. Maybe I was starting to see things.

This guy was a kind of George Costanza type with hair. I started to fantasize or was I dreaming? Could this guy be my "Guardian angel of tickets?" Well, he looked like about the kind of angel I would be sent. I had to make some kind of move just in case this guy was the answer to my prayers. Heck, at this point, what did I have to lose?

I walked right up to him and asked, "How much do you want?" The guy looked away and didn't answer. I repeated, only much louder now, "How much do you want for the tickets?" The guy looked at me with a mistrusting look. "Are you a cop?" he asked. To which I replied, "No, are you a cop?" After about four exchanges of this, "Are you a cop?" "No, are you a cop?" routine, we began to establish some trust.

"Of course, I'm not a cop. I'm a Realtor from Sarasota, Florida. Here, look at my license. And if you don't believe me, here, I don't know what faith you are, but I'm Greek Orthodox, these are my palms." With that I pulled out the two palms that I received from church at the start of the playoffs on Palm Sunday several weeks earlier. The guy looked at me as if I was crazy, but at least now, he believed I wasn't a cop.

"My buddies and I have these tickets, but we can't give you one or sell you one," he started. Now it seemed as if he was speaking Russian to me. I didn't know what the heck he was talking about, yet I kept listening. "You see, we have three tickets, and we can try to get you in, but you can't have a stub. What we'll do is: you walk in with us and we'll point to you like you're with us. If you get in, you give me \$200. If you don't get in or there is trouble at the door, you just act like you don't know us. Got it? Are you in?" he said sounding more like George Costanza by the minute. Still not

understanding, yet still very interested, I asked, "Hell, I'll give you \$300 if I get in, but what's the story with the tickets?"

"Well, you see, uh, these tickets are for Game 6. And we all know there ain't going to be a Game 6. We're going to try to pass these tickets off as tonight's tickets. You understand?" I understood. Now, I wondered if it would work. I also wondered if I had the combination of guts and stupidity that it takes to follow through with something like this. Finally, I wondered if this guy's real name was Clarence. Nah, can't be. Anyway, in a few moments we were all going to try to "earn our wings."

Be the Crowd...Be the Crowd!

...the hope...

The four of us... three complete strangers and I discussed the plan. "Okay are you guys ready? Are you up for this,?" the George look-alike said. "Yes, let's go and let's pick that door over there," I responded. Slowly we moved toward the door that was our way into Joe Louis and Game 4 of the Stanley Cup Finals. The doorway was ominous looking. I followed these three guys to the doorway where they were met by the ticket taker. I approached with apprehension and my heart was beating like crazy. The ticket taker took the tickets and said, "How many of you are there?" "Four" responded, Clarence. "He's with us," he said pointing his finger at me. The ticket taker started to examine the tickets and said, "There are only three tickets." As that was being said, I walked in the door and moved to the right, and then to the left and then to the right again. I walked briskly but did not run. I was as cool as a Russian spy, but sweating like a Detroit auto worker. My heart was pounding out of my chest, but I was in the arena. I was invisible. I was in, but I couldn't believe it. I had gotten across the heavily guarded border and no one saw me. It was like a giant gust of wind had pushed me through the door. The remarkable thing was that no one, not a single soul, saw me fly through those doors.

"Be the crowd. Be the crowd," I remember thinking as I got lost in the mass of red and white. I could just barely hear the music blaring in the arena, over the pounding of my heart. I was in shock. I kept looking over my shoulder, hoping and praying that I would not be found out. I made my way to standing room only and the inside of the arena. I found a spot on the wall and the pre-game hype was in full gear. It was absolutely the most incredible feeling I've ever had in my life. The music was pounding and my heart was beating in perfect rhythm. The Gary Glitter "Rock & Roll part II" ("Hey" song) was played, then Ted Nugent's "Wango Tango," and finally KISS's "Detroit Rock City." It all sounded perfect. I was pumped. The arena looked spectacular. I felt like I was in a scene from The Wizard of Oz. You know the scene where Dorothy steps from black and white to color when she enters Oz? I was entering an Oz of my own. Only I was going from a black-and-white scene to one that was pure red and white. The feeling was unbelievable. I was in. And while there was no yellow brick road to lead me there, I knew that I was truly home.

Everything was right with the world. There's no place like home ice...There's no place like home ice...

Thank You, God

...the grace...

Standing there listening to the music blaring as the lights dimmed on the glowing arena, I was in heaven. Nothing could top this. It was a concertlike atmosphere, only better. The ice was being flashed with large multicolored octopi. Budd Lynch's voice came over the PA. The players flew out onto the ice. The ovation was deafening. The city of Detroit, and Red Wings fans and players everywhere, had been waiting for this moment for a long time. I screamed at the top of my lungs as the lineups were being announced. I screamed not only for the '97 Red Wings, but also for all the other Red Wings teams that had tried so hard before and had not reached this pinnacle. The rest of the people in the arena were also screaming. Most were screaming for the same reasons. The bond that was formed that night with those players and fans, I will never forget for as long as I live. A pure feeling of joy and expectancy was in the air. And, yes, love was in the air, too. Between screams, I looked up to the heavens of the Joe Louis Arena and thanked God for His help as I did my cross. Tears were in my eyes. I was home. I was at the game. I was going to see Stevie raise the Cup. There was no doubt in my mind.

My tears of joy turned to smiles and laughter as I mused at the situation. I had done it. I had accomplished my goal. But I knew that I didn't do it alone. I had a lot of help. In a move that Sergei Fedorov would be proud of, I moved through the Joe Louis defense untouched. In a different time, and in another place I could have been a Russian hockey player, who was sneaking past the border to play hockey in a better place. But I wasn't. I was a 35-year old lifelong Red Wings fan who had tried to get tickets but couldn't get them. I was a guy who wanted to get to my better place to watch a hockey game. In that way, both Sergei and I got help from people in high places to accomplish our goals. His help came from the higher-ups in the Red Wings organization. My help came from an even higher source, from someone Who watches all the games, and never needs a ticket to get in.

Standing Room Only, Sitting On the Steps and the Big Usher

... the Contentment..

As I wandered around the arena, I looked for my *Costanza-like Clarence* guardian angel. I wanted to give him his money. But he could not be found anywhere. I know what you're thinking, "Right, you're going to look for the guy and pay him. That sounds like something out of a Frank Capra movie." Well the truth is, I did try, but *unfortunately*, I couldn't find Clarence. I don't think he or his buddies got in. I would have gladly given him the \$300. By the way, Clarence, if you're reading this, get in touch with me, I want to thank you for helping me see the game. I believe I have a score to settle with you.

For the first 10 minutes of the game I was moved almost every 30 seconds by ambitious ushers who wanted to clear the aisles. They were just good people who were trying to do their jobs. I was not complaining. I was just trying to find some friendly wall space to lean on. By the way, I would have lain on the floor to watch this game. But you probably already knew that.

Soon I would sit on the floor, as I found some steps toward the upper bowl that were to my liking. Great seats on the steps. Reminded me of the mezzanine in the old Olympia. Great angles. You could see the play developing from there. As I sat there with the beer sticking to the bottom of my jeans, I couldn't help but smile. I was completely content. Sitting on the steps talking to people about hockey. It just didn't get any better than this. I daydreamed for a second and thought of something my dad had shared with me over the years. I remember him telling me how he would sneak into the old Olympia with my Aunt Becca, and how they would park themselves on the steps and watch the great Detroit Red Wings teams of the forties and fifties. The thought warmed my heart. The feeling was short lived, however, as a big usher noticed us and did his best to move gracefully up the steps. Try as he did, he still moved as sluggishly as the Philadelphia defense, but his resolve was much greater. "I'm only going to tell you once," he barked in a John Candy-like imitation. I was gone before he could finish yelling his orders. I had to move. It was the right thing to do. After all, "my seats" were in Standing Room Only.

Wings and a "Moody Usher" Really Move Me

...the hassle...

Both the ushers and the Wings were really moving me. Can't stand here. Can't stand there. I was told by a number of ushers. "Hey, I got tickets...Ah...never mind," I started to say. I moved around and tried to find any good spot. Let me just take this one picture, I pleaded. For the most part, the first period of the final game was a blur for me. I couldn't find my niche. I couldn't get comfortable. I knew what the Flyers were going through. They couldn't find any space on the ice, and I couldn't find any space on the wall. But I shut my mouth, took my pictures and took in the sights. After all, who was I to complain? Gradually I started to establish some rapport with some of the ushers who were just doing their job, which at times was a thankless one. In many ways, they worked like the grind line. They went in the corners and made sure that the stars (fans)would get a good opportunity to get a good look at the net.

My luck on this blessed night would continue as I would meet and befriend a couple of the ushers. One usher in particular, was especially kind, and although his name was Moody, his temperament was not. He did his job, in the same manner that a Kris Draper, Kirk Maltby or Joey Kocur do theirs. Nothing fancy, just good hard work, with positive results. Time after time, he had to clear people out of the "viewing crease" that is Standing Room Only. I was one of those people that he moved a number of times. More times than not, he moved the patrons with class and dignity, even while insults were being hurled his way from overzealous fans who had a few too many. As I stood there, I struck up a conversation with this even-tempered usher with the Moody name.

Then for no reason, this usher made room for me on the wall. "Hey, guys," he said to the two guys standing next to me. "Make some room." I squeezed into the spot, which would become my home for the rest of the night. Soon I would become instant friends with Tony and Mike, the guys standing next to me. "You guys want a beer? I'm buying," I said. "Sure," they said with a surprised look. After a couple of beers I was given all the room I wanted. So as the Wings were searching for their broom, while Philly's Legion of Doom couldn't find any room on the

ice, I found my niche. It was not much to look at it, but it was my space and I guarded it like it was sacred land. I am, after all a Realtor, and while this was not waterfront property, it was "home ice front." And to me it was *priceless*.

The Game...It's Only a Matter of Nuts and Grind

...the inevitable...

The game for the most part, was a mere formality. Everyone knew that the Wings would win. The Wings knew. The Flyers knew. Las Vegas knew. Heck, even *ESPN*'s Barry Melrose knew. The game itself was not a pure classic, yet it had classic moments. For the most part, the Wings took it one minute at a grind, as they squeezed the last breaths out of the Philly "giants." The Wings had finally achieved that necessary quality that is inherent in all champions - a killer instinct. They toyed with the Flyers the way a cat plays with a mouse before it finally puts the slower, confused, creature out of its misery.

The end was in sight for the boys from Philadelphia, after a beautiful goal by Darren McCarty. Creating moves that were better suited for guys named Stevie, Mario, Sergei and Wayne, McCarty brought the Wings fans out of their seats while he brought the Flyers to their knees. McCarty would say of his pretty goal, "Even a blind squirrel finds a nut once in a while." The Flyers' biggest squirrel, Mr. Lindros, had trouble gathering up his opportunities. For that reason, it would be a long summer ahead for him. In the end I guess he just didn't have the nuts. Nevertheless, the Philadelphia papers were full of them, as all the Philly sportswriters picked the big Flyers over the fast Wings. I, incidently picked the Wings in five. That doesn't make me smart; it just proves what McCarty said, that even a fan who has blind loyalty is rewarded once in a while. It was now only a matter of time. My \$6 beer never tasted better. Hey, Darren, do you think you could pass me some pistachios? Of course, the red ones. They are my favorites, always have been.

Tick Tock...the Countdown...to the Cup

...the anticipation...

Like a scene out of The Wizard of Oz, in which the Wicked Witch melts before your eyes, the clock seemed to melt before my eyes, as everyone's anticipation grew for what was about to happen. The clock, which at one time during the evening was so much an enemy of mine, was now turning into a long-lost friend. Now I didn't mind if the seconds ticked away. In fact, I welcomed the countdown with open arms. But I also understood Stevie's comments that he made soon after the game. Stevie had said that he couldn't wait for this moment to finally get there, and while he was glad it was over he also felt like he never wanted it to end. I, too, wanted it to end, but at the same time I wanted it to go on forever. Most everybody in Hockeytown felt this way on this magical night. As each puck was iced and as each second ticked away, I took a mental picture in my mind, if not with my camera. I knew that the time was slipping away, and I just wanted to make sure that I was ready to document the memory properly. I looked around and everyone was smiling and cheering. It was a perfect scene. The clock ticked down, 5 minutes to play ...then 4, then 3...then 2...then Budd Lynch's voice...LAST MINUTE TO PLAY IN THE THIRD PERIOD...The crowd went crazy.

The clock was not only counting down on a Wings victory, it was also serving to erase so many years of bad memories that seemed to happen time after time through the many long years. Inside of 20 seconds, Eric scores his first goal of the series. I guess even a blind center finds a nut when time is running out. The face off at center ice. Another stop in play. Start the clock again. 6...5...4...3...2...1..0 The Wings Win! The Wings Win! The Demons are gone. Ding dong, the Wicked Witch is dead! Stevie jumps into Vernon's arms. The Red Wings win! Finally! After all that time. Oh, what a great time! Oh, what a night!

We Are the Champions...My Friend

...the happiness...

Confetti fell in slow motion from the heavens as fans hugged each other like they were long lost pals. Perfect strangers went high-five crazy. Who could blame them? The music blared as the place was a frenzy of red and white. The man with the Yzerman jersey hugged the lady with the Fedorov jersey. The guy with the red Konstantinov jersey kissed the lady wearing an old white Gordie Howe jersey. The kid from Redford slapped the hands of the kid from St. Clair Shores. In the stands the fans hugged, high-fived and embraced each other. And on the ice, the scene was much the same.

The Wings huddled and smothered each other near the glass. They had grown so close as they had gone through so much together. All the years and tears, all the ups and downs, all the hopes and doubts, all the successes and failures met in that corner, on that special night. There they held each other. There they hugged each other. It was their time and their place to take the scene in. As they did, old demons were exorcised and new champions were born. And if you looked hard enough, while they took videos of each other and slapped each other on the back, you could see some of them saying, "We are the champions, my friend."

Stevie Raises the Cup...and the Tissue Business Explodes

...the emotion...

The players lined up for the ceremonial handshakes that follow the end of every Stanley Cup playoff series. Stevie patted Eric on the back, as if to tell him there would be other times for him to accomplish this goal. "Just be a little patient. Your time will come." You could almost see Stevie saying it. What else would you expect from the classiest Captain in the league? Stevie had heard it all before from the likes of Gretzky, Messier and Sakic. It was now, however, his time. He had earned it. Boy, had he earned it. Now the Cup was on its way. After a rousing celebration and presentation of the Conn Smythe Trophy to Mike Vernon, everyone's sights turned to the area near the Red Wings bench. The Cup was in the building, and it was making its way up the corridor, guarded by the guys with the gloves.

The Wings gathered off to the side like children at Christmas time who were anxiously waiting to open their gifts. One not-so-young child waited off to the center of the ice. His name was Stevie. All the other Wings watched him as he waited for this present, his present to arrive. It was a gift that he had wanted for so long and one that he thought he was going to get a long time ago. In the past the "Grinch" showed up and stole the Cup. It seemed like something always happened and the present never arrived. This time it would. Nothing could stop it now. The Cup was slowly brought out onto the ice and taken to an area near the commissioner and Stevie. The players' faces told it all. They were glowing as they looked at the classy Captain politely listen to the commissioner go through his spiel. "There has always been a mystique about the Detroit Red Wings," "...and not since Gordie Howe has the banner been raised," "It gives me great pleasure to present the Stanley Cup to Steve Yzerman." The ovation was deafening. Stevie raises the Cup! The cameras clicked and the tissue business exploded. Women were crying. Men were crying. Children were yelling. I was doing all three, clicking, yelling and crying. Slowly he skated around the ice in a kind of Russian march. His smile stretched from ear to ear. Even with the missing tooth, he never looked stronger and happier. The Cup, the Cup never looked shinier and it never looked better in any player's hands. The Captain and the Cup were finally together.

The scene looked so natural, so perfect and so right. Everyone had waited so long for this moment and now it was finally here. The Captain skated

around the rink, finally a true champion. Fans, media and teammates all watched him with admiration and an outpouring of love and affection. The Captain then handed the Cup to his boss, Mr. Ilitch, the man who had been waiting as long as Stevie for this moment. They hugged. It was a great and deserving moment for the both of them. Then just as he had proved in his previous 14 years, Stevie, the unselfish Captain, quickly shifted the spotlight to two teammates. He handed the chalice off to Larionov and Fetisov, the two former Russian Red Army greats, who were now Red Wings champions. In his illustrious career, he has always been there to give an assist to a teammate, and now he proved something to the entire hockey world that we already knew for years in Detroit. And that is, that Stevie Yzerman has always been a champion. The only difference now is, it's in writing, on a strangely shaped cup, named after a guy by the name of Stanley. There his name will be read over the years by the peewee hockey player in Sarnia, the old man in Montreal, the teenager in Detroit, and the fan in Sarasota. There his name will remain as long as the great game of hockey is played. That is why they play the games. That is why they take the punishment. And that is why there wasn't a dry eye in the house on this June night.

Pure Joy...Better than I Thought It Would Be

..the reward...

The Cup passed from one player to another as each player shared in the celebration in the same fashion that they shared in the work. Equally. From the two Russians, it was handed to Scotty Bowman, who put on his skates. Then to Shanny, who kissed the cup and was overwhelmed by this humbling experience. Sergei then grabbed it and skated around as if he was in a figure skating competition, pirouetting and looping around the ice like Tara Lipinski. On this night, the Russian, American and Canadian judges in the stands all agreed and gave Sergei marks of a perfect 10. The Cup was passed around, as was the joy. Draper, the hardest working man in Hockeytown, who came to embody the spirit and determination of this great team, grabbed the Cup and raised it. Lidstrom lifted it gently, in an unassuming manner, yet his joy was just as evident. In contrast, Darren McCarty raised it with great force, much in the same way he took an opponent into the corner. Everyone had his chance to raise it, from the player who logged the big minutes to the guys who hardly played at all. The coaches all touched it, and even the Zamboni guy got his hands on it. And why not? It was a total team effort. Why shouldn't it be a total celebration?

The veteran Murphy was beaming, thankful for one more chance to get his hands on this symbol. On this night, Toronto was a million miles away for him. He had been rescued from that other great hockey mecca of Toronto and a sentence he was serving there with that last place team, with a last minute trade. And somewhere, in a place that was almost a million miles away from Detroit, in a town where they speak Russian, people watched as the man with the number 16 took his turn to touch the Cup. As Vladdie took the Cup and shook it, just as he would shake up opposing players with bonecrushing hits, the joy on his face was similar to that of Doug Brown, the lone American on the team. Pure joy. It transcended ethnic boundaries or backgrounds. My, how far had Vladdie come to play hockey in this town by the Detroit River. A long way for sure. But not as far as all of us had come. Just a few years ago, we were taught to hate each other. They were the bad guys. We were the good guys. Well, tonight, we had come full circle. We were all good guys as we cheered, with great love and affection for this number 16, who was now our guy, the Vladinator. The only guys who hated him were the guys who played against him on the ice. And that's just the way it should be. Sometimes in life, the real event actually exceeds the

expectation of the event. It doesn't always happen, but when it does happen it is truly beautiful and special. So often in life, you get disappointed when you get to your goal. It doesn't measure up to the hype.

In my life, I've been fortunate enough to get to certain goals and not be disappointed. I traveled to Greece and saw the Parthenon. That truly exceeded my expectations. Chills ran through my Greek-American veins. The same thing happened when I visited the Grand Canyon. It was better than I thought it would be. I arrived early with my friends one morning to watch God flick the dimmer switch on the Canyon and light it up with all its brilliance. That I will never forget. I had the great God-given fortune of meeting my hero and idol, the late, great American actor, Jimmy Stewart. While I had read and heard how great and genuine this man was, he proved it to me in person. When we met, he displayed the kindness of a real-life George Bailey, the man who helped an angel named Clarence earn his wings.

And now this. After all that time and all those years, I was watching Stevie and the Wings raise the Cup. I knew it would be amazing, but it was unbelievable. The moment overcame me. It was pure joy, and it was much better than I thought it would be.

The Aftermath....4~0..."How Sweep It Is"

...the teamwork...

As the fans poured out of the arena, everyone was naturally in a good mood. Complete strangers embraced in the streets of Detroit. I shook countless hands, as people blew horns and yelled at the top of their lungs. It was a moment for the ages, for Red Wings fans of all ages. Together on this June night, the city came together to feel good. The only colors that mattered were the red and white on the classic Detroit jersey. Blacks and whites shook hands and pointed one finger in the air, signifying that the Wings were number one, and possibly at least for this night that we were all one, united for one cause, to celebrate the pure joy of the victory. For this night, it was not only the Philadelphia Flyers who were swept away. Swept away, too, were the bad memories of so many lost hockey seasons, and so many years of economic decay in this once proud and great city. As I looked around Detroit on this night, I was not only happy to be home, but also proud. People celebrated in a manner that should earn them wings, as they behaved like responsible, yet loud angels. While you may not have read about it in the Philadelphia or Chicago papers, the people of Detroit showed the world the right way to celebrate.

As far as the city goes, Detroit is on its way back. Just as the Wings returned to glory following the lead of Steve Yzerman, the city of Detroit is coming back under the dynamic leadership of Mayor Archer. Sure, there are still buildings to be rebuilt, but it is the people who must build them. On that night, in this greatest of all sports towns, the people had come Downtown. They had come there to feel good, and they will come and do it again. While we don't have a Wayne Gretzky in town, this team is a great one and this city can be a Great One again. And to paraphrase the original "Great One," Jackie Gleason, "How sweep it is."

Hockey, Hot Dogs, an Old Chevrolet....and Coney! Coney!

...the spot...

Where did I go to celebrate? I headed to Greektown, but I was diverted to the American Coney Island on Lafayette. This is the classic Detroit place to hang out, have a hot dog and talk about the goings on in the Motor City. Over the years, Detroiters would gather here before and after the games played by the Pistons, Lions, Tigers and Red Wings. Great history. Kings of foreign countries have eaten here. Famous athletes, musicians, politicians and just plain normal folks have either eaten here or next store at the Lafayette Coney Island. As you look around this brightly lit place on this dark Detroit street, you could imagine Diana Ross having a loose burger as Gordie Howe sat at the next table and chased down a couple Coneys with Ted Lindsay and Sid Abel. Sends chili up and down my spine. But then again, maybe that's just me. I do, after all, have chili in my veins, American Coney Island Chili to be sure. American Coney Island, the name says it all. Was there ever a place that better symbolized the pace and pulse of the Motor City? A true classic. It is extra special to me because it also happens to be my godfather's place. I had to have a hot dog and a beer here. It was the right thing and a Detroit thing to do. What better place to celebrate the Wings' classic victory than in this classic spot?

Hundreds of thousands of hot dogs have been served to loyal customers over its long and storied history. At the American Coney Island, they've always had their own kind of "production line." It has remained in this same location, at the corner of Michigan and Lafayette, for over 75 years. It was there serving Detroiters "2 with everything on 'em," when the Wings won their first Stanley Cup in 1936. It was there serving "two loose" in the forties and fifties when the Wings and the Motor City were both flying in high gear. It was still there in 1968 when the Tigers won it all. My godfather told me Norm Cash, Jim Northrup, Willie Horton and A1 Kaline used to come in all the time. It was there when the Tigers won again in 1984. I've been told, Tram and Lou would come in and "turn two, with everything on 'em." The American Coney Island was there when the Lions won in the fifties, when a young, Bobby Layne would come in and load his dogs with heavy mustard. Although the Pistons moved away to the suburbs, many fans celebrated the back-to-back championships of the late eighties and early nineties at the American Coney Island.

Through the good teams and the bad teams, and the good times and the bad times, the *American Coney Island* has been there. On this very special night in June of 1997, when a very good Detroit team won, I was there to have a good time. And to be frank with you (please, excuse the pun), there wasn't another place in the world where I would have rather been. The place was packed, wall to wall with hungry Red Wings fans. I never did get to sit down and have my hot dog and beer. But that was okay. I am family, so I helped out for a few hours. Sat people, took orders, bussed tables and talked to a bunch of happy people. It was great. One customer was the usher from the hockey game who had helped me out. He was on my turf now, so I did my best to find him a space.

As the night moved on, I stood outside the door and ushered people away from the *Lafayette Coney Island*, which is located next door, in the same manner waiters have been doing it for years. Only on this night I had my own lines, "Stevie Yzerman eats at the *American*...Eric Lindros eats at *Lafayette*." It worked. More times than not, they would come in to my godfather's place. It was now 3 a.m. I was wiped out. Happy, but wiped out. I grabbed an old Chevy cab and headed to Greektown to pick up my car. It was a long night. A couple of days later, after the parade, I stopped in again to try to get my "coney fix." My godfather thanked me for helping out and then he told me that Mr. Ilitch had come in at about 4 a.m., after Game 4 to do some celebrating of his own. I just missed him. Apparently he can't live on pizza, pizza alone. I guess he needed to have his "coney, coney." Hey, Mike, we understand. You're a Detroiter. You had to be there. So did I. It was a Detroit thing,...and the American thing, to do.

The Parade and the Pride

...the satisfaction...

I am not a big parade fan by nature. The annual Detroit Thanksgiving Day parade-been there, done that. I remember, and, not fondly, going to many of those as a kid, while waiting endlessly for Santa to arrive at *Hudson's*. There was always one guy that got his big head in our way to block our view. So for me at least, parades were no big deal. I always thought you could see more on TV. Still for some reason, I wanted to go to this one. This parade was special. So to see it, I grabbed my parade- going pal of years past, my sister, Cle, and headed downtown. We got a late start and the traffic on the way downtown was hideous. The crowds were enormous everywhere. The day was bright and sunny. A perfect June day. A day that tempted even the best kid to skip school and go fishing. Well, today there were many kids, "big kids," that skipped work to be at the parade. But there was no need to worry for most of them, their bosses were skipping out early, too.

We parked on Lafayette near the *American Coney Island* and tried to scope out a plan and a good roost to watch our Wings. We decided on an area near Hart Plaza. A great location. We watched and saw all our heroes, Shanny, Vernie, Sergei, Darren, Drapes, Vladdie and, of course, Stevie. It was pure pandemonium. People poured into the streets to get a close look at the Cup as Stevie drove by. The look on the players' faces told it all. They were shocked by the turnout. It was a magnificent sight.

Over one million people hanging out in downtown Detroit on a perfect afternoon. The nice thing was, every one was in a good mood. They all had smiles on their faces. Proud smiles. And they all, every last one of them, acted like true champions. There were no incidents. Not a single one. The only images of Detroit that *CNN* and *ESPN* would show on that night would be positive ones. And that might be the nicest result of this whole journey. Detroiters everywhere were able to say with pride that they were from Detroit not only because the Wings won, but also because of how the fans celebrated. YES! Stand up and tell them you're from Detroit, as the commercial used to say. I know I will. I always have. Now it will be a little easier to get up and tell them.

We heard the players make their speeches at Hart Plaza. We couldn't see them. We were probably a half mile from the stage. It didn't matter. We were literally in the heart of the celebration. And what we couldn't see, we could definitely feel. And the feelings that prevailed were pride and joy. It was a day that I shall never forget, when one million people got together to feel good about the team, the town and themselves. Later that night I watched the parade coverage that my mom "Fredarov" had taped for me. Oh sure, the pictures were nice and you could see better on TV, but you could sure feel it better in person.

On the way home from the parade, my sister and I stopped at the *American Coney Island*. There were a few coneys there with my name on it that I didn't get to enjoy the other night. My sister drove home as a fat guy from Detroit, named Gus, devoured four coneys in the seat next to her. I performed a kind of sweep myself. Gus 4-0 over the coneys. They didn't know what "bit" them. It was all over very quickly but not very neatly. Got onions on the seat and some chili and some mustard on my Fedorov jersey. It wasn't pretty, but they never tasted better. It will be a day that will always warm my heart, even though the hot dogs gave me a little heartburn. But it was a different kind of heartburn. One I much prefer over the kind I used to get when watching the Wings in years past. My stomach was full of hot dogs and my mind was full of pride and memories. Hey, Wings, "Franks for the memories."

The Celebration Continues...Don't Stop Me Now...Cause We're Having a Good Time

...the joy...

Driving around town during that week back home was very special. Everyone was up. Everyone was in a good mood. Red Wings flags were attached to every kind of car. From the old Chevy and new Ford to the shiny Benz and BMW, the Motor City was in overdrive in this love affair with their beloved Wings. As Henry Ford used to say, "A chicken in every pot and a Ford in every garage," and while it was not there physically, Henry might have added "a Stanley Cup in every Red Wings fan's home."

The celebration took many forms as the city just plain felt good about what had happened. Horns honked, strangers waved to each other. All people wearing Red Wings clothing were treated like royalty. People wore lanky, warm Red Wings jerseys around town, even though temperatures climbed into the mid-80s. I brought a suitcase full of clothes from Florida but opted for my newly purchased Red Wings attire. And why shouldn't I? I looked good in red. Especially in my Fedorov jersey. I wore it for the whole week that I was there. I even put it on for the Grand Prix. I felt like a kid again. I was ready to play floor hockey, street hockey, or the table top game. With the Wings victory came a rebirth and a renewed hope that perhaps, if you try hard enough, long enough, maybe your dreams really do come true. I watched all the specials on TV commemorating the victory. The whole town was going ga-ga over the Wings. The local newscasts were filled with good news, as the Wings made the town forget about their troubles for a while. The town was celebrating in every way possible.

When Darren McCarty threw out the first pitch at the Tigers game on the Wednesday following the Cup victory, I was there. He got the biggest ovation of the day. Everybody felt good about this team. I drove around town all week blaring the same tape in my brother-in-law's convertible. I must have played it a hundred times. Same tunes they played at the arena. That jock rock stuff. I never got sick of it. I just kept replaying it. Same with my videotape of the game. I kept watching Stevie raise that Cup over and over. It was a celebration that seemed would go on forever. But like all things in life, both good and bad, it had to end. Fate did not care if we were all having a good time. Bad news would soon be on the doorstep and the music was about to stop.



Gordie Howe, centering a line made up of my dad on the left wing and my Uncle Pierre on the right wing around 1970. Now that's a production line that would make any kid a hockey fan.



Meeting my hero the late great actor and American Jimmy Stewart and his gracious wife Gloria in New York city around 1990. Meeting him made me feel like the richest man in town.



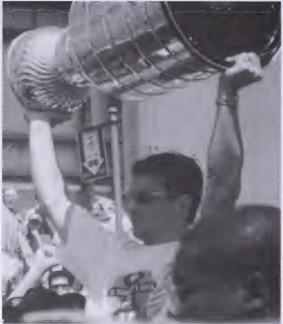
Meeting another one of my heroes, the great Al Kaline of the Detroit Tigers, in February of 1997 at the TPC in Sarasota.



Outside the Joe Louis Arena just minutes before Game 4 was about to start, and moments before I met "Clarence."



I was ready to paint the town red while attending the Red Wings victory parade in June of 1997, on the streets of Downtown Detroit. The parade made me proud to be a Detroiter.



Stevie Yzerman, the Captain of his team and this town, raises the Cup for the Detroit faithful, while proving that some athletes are worthy role models and deserve to be called a hero.



Darren McCarty, a great force at any parade and even greater force on any team.



Sergei goes Hollywood. Could he be pointing to my mom "Fredarov" who was at home taping the parade?



Shanny takes in the sunshine and the parade while doing it with a humbling smile.



Allie made sure I got the picture.



Allie as she celebrated the Wings recent Championship.

III. THE TRAGEDY

Friday the 13th...from Triumph to Tragedy

...the accident...

Are you superstitious? I suppose I am to a certain degree. On this Friday the 13th, I was playing golf with my Uncle Steve and my cousin, John, up in Ann Arbor. Perfect day. Perfect golf course. Perfect Stanley Cup Champion golf shirt. Imperfect golf swing. Well, I guess you can't have everything. Still, I was having such a good time. I pulled out a 2-iron and would say, "I'm hitting a Fetisov," or a 5-iron and say, "I'm hitting a Lidstrom." My uncle and cousin laughed at me. "Time to hit the 8-iron, the Larionov," I said from a 130 yards out. Detroit was far away, but the Red Wings were on my mind all day. I was soaking in the sunshine and gloating about the Wings victory just six days earlier. On a golf course, on the same day, in a place not far away from where I was playing, most of the Detroit Red Wings were gathering for one last party. It was one last chance to be together and share the moment with teammates before they flew off in different directions for the summer.

On this day, they chose to be together, take a few swings, have a few beers and share a few laughs. I was doing much of the same with family members. I took my swings and hit my shots. Mostly bad ones. Still, I was happy just to play, hideous score and all. I got done at the course at about 5 p.m. Had a burger at my cousin's house, then headed for the airport to pick up my return ticket home. At the airport there was a huge line, so I decided to come back later. No big deal, I thought. Yet something bothered me. I didn't know what yet, but something was different. It was the first time during the whole trip that things didn't go just perfect for me.

I went home and relaxed. I was exhausted. The trip was starting to take its toll on me. I had been on a nonstop Red Wings victory tour all week. On this night I made tentative plans to go to Royal Oak and hang out with my sister and my cousin, Andrea. I was too tired. I would cancel the plans and stay home with my sister and catch up on things. Quality time. There was one thing we had to do and that was go to the airport and get my ticket before midnight, so my great rate of \$91 would still apply. At about 9:30 p.m. on this night of Friday the 13th, my sister and I headed to the airport to pick up my "wings" for my return flight the next day.

As we drove over, we talked and listened to the Bulls/Jazz Championship

series. The game was then interrupted with a news flash. "This is a special report. Apparently there has been an accident involving members of the Detroit Red Wings in Birmingham. The accident involves a limo and it took place just a few minutes ago on Woodward Avenue. Initial reports state that the injured players are Fetisov, Konstantinov, possibly Sergei Fedorov and a team masseur. They have all been taken to William Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak, Michigan. The injuries at this time appear to be minor. We'll keep you updated as the story develops. Now let's go back to the game."

A sick feeling had come over me. I looked at my sister in disbelief. This can't be happening, I thought. Not to them. Not now. I was in shock. I stumbled, dazed and confused, into the airport to pick up my tickets only to encounter a larger, more hostile line. After waiting for over an hour to get my seats, they shut down the counter. I would have to come back tomorrow. As we drove home from the airport, my sister and I listened for news about our injured "Wings." The sketchy reports came over the air ways. "Red Wings team members have headed to the hospital." That didn't sound good, I thought. Coverage went back to the Bulls game. The Bulls won. They had just defeated Utah for another NBA championship. Soon, the city of Chicago would be celebrating. At about the same time, in a place about 250 miles away called Detroit, the celebration was over.

It Wasn't Supposed to Happen

...the shock...

That night we stood glued to the TV for any word on the status of our fallen Wings. With time came a clearer understanding of who was involved and what happened. The "Why," however, had to be left for another time. Reports started to paint the tragic picture. "Three team members of the Detroit Red Wings, Vladimir Konstantinov, Viacheslav Fetisov and Sergei Mnatsakanov, were all seriously injured when a limousine that they had rented for the day veered off Woodward Avenue and struck a tree. The driver was also taken to the hospital, but he was not listed in serious condition."

What? I thought. This can't be happening. It's not supposed to be like this. They rented a limo to be safe and this happens. I was in shock. We all were. Not a single one of us wanted to believe this was happening. The fact of the matter was, that it was happening. I couldn't imagine how their families felt. How devastating. They took all the right precautions to be safe and this happens. My thoughts and prayers focused on how their families would deal with this tragedy. More news reports came in. More serious sobering statements. "At this time, Mr. Konstantinov and Mr. Mnatsakanov have suffered serious, life-threatening head injuries and they're in critical condition. The next 24 to 48 hours will tell a lot about the directions that their conditions will take. Mr. Fetisov's condition, while serious, is not life-threatening, and the driver of the car, is in fair condition."

There was nothing fair about this whole thing. The moment I heard the news, I was mostly filled with sadness. As the sobering news filtered in, I did what many other people around the city of Detroit did on that night, I shed tears of pain and sorrow and prayed for these fallen Wings. I sat stunned, dazed, and wounded. The Red Wings jersey that I wore so proudly and happily for the previous six days was now filled with sad tears of pain and agony. Unlike the mustard stains that I removed from that jersey days earlier, I knew that no matter how hard I tried, the tear stains in this jersey would never come out.

Lord...Please Mend Our "Broken Wings"

...the prayer...

Sleep. What's that? On this night, I tried to sleep but could not. I tossed and turned all night, and in between, wondered, if this was all a bad dream. Unfortunately it was not. I woke up early to watch the press conference at 8 a.m. Saturday. "Their conditions remain very serious." Exactly a week earlier I was flying home to see my Wings. What a difference a week made. In the sky on that flight, as I flew through the clouds, I prayed for a safe landing. Now, on the ground, in Detroit a week later, I was again praying for a safe landing for our wounded Wings.

People all over the city were bound even tighter by this tragedy. In a week's time the emotional roller coaster had taken Detroiters from feelings of expectancy to pure joy, pride, happiness, sadness and finally back to hope and prayer. It sounded a lot like life.

On this day *WJR* was rebroadcasting the final game of the Wings victory. As I drove around town I had it on, but I couldn't listen. The broadcast seemed hollow. I passed many concession stands that day, but I could not stop and buy a shirt. It didn't seem right. The horns in the city had stopped blowing. The feeling of joy was gone. The only thing left to do now was hope and pray.

That morning I had breakfast with my sister Cle, aunt Antonia and brother-in-law Dragan. Before the meal, Dragan, who had studied to be a Serbian Orthodox priest, said a prayer in Russian for these fallen Wings. It was a touching moment. Miles away at the scene of the accident, people of all different faiths and backgrounds had already gathered to set up a vigil and adorn the sight with signs of hope and prayer. One sign read, "Lord, please mend our broken Wings." Nothing else had to be said or written. The fate of our Wings was in God's hands now. All we could do now was hope and pray that He would help them.

The Long Flight Back

...the memories...

One week had flown by. I was heading back to Sarasota, but I can't say I was heading home. Home is where the heart is, and my heart, at least a big part of it, would always be in Detroit. Mr. Bennett could sing about the city by the bay, but I was about to leave my heart in Detroit. This trip reminded me about how much I missed this place. I reminisced about the memories, and all the great times I shared with the people I love and the places we would go. Together they make up the scrapbook in my mind of my hometown. My dad taking me to the ballgame to see the great Al Kaline. Meeting another "winged" hero Mark "the Bird" Fidrych at Ginopolis'restaurant when I was a kid. Sitting at that long counter and enjoying a sundae at Sanders on any day. My mom making her world-famous spinach pie and flashing that world-class smile. Going to see Bob Seger with my sister at Cobo Hall or Pine Knob. Skiing with my buddies at Mount Brighton. Visiting the Henry Ford Museum and strolling through historic Greenfield Village. A Miller's burger in Dearborn. A flaming cheese in Greektown. A Coney Island with my godfather at the American Coney Island. The family dinners on Sunday with my aunts, uncles and cousins. The memories are as sweet as a mother's smile. It just doesn't get any better than spending the day with people that you love. It reminds me of how precious life really is, because no one really knows what awaits him or her around that next corner, and how drastic one's life can change within a moment's notice. I thought a lot about our injured Wings. I broke down when Stevie did the press conference that Saturday afternoon. Just a week earlier he was lifting the Cup over his head. On this day he was carrying something much heavier. We all were.

Just one week earlier I had arrived in Detroit with great anticipation. Now I was leaving with a heavy yet hopeful heart. During the day I was going through the motions. I was walking and moving around in a daze. I picked up my pictures from the game but had no great desire to see them. The feeling was bittersweet. I had stopped telling my story about how I got into the game. I was in no mood to tell it. And quite frankly I don't think anybody was in the mood to hear it. I had stopped buying souvenirs. It just didn't seem right. All week, I was trying to buy my brother-in-law Dragan a Konstantinov jersey. Each time I thought I got a lead on one, the shop owner had told me to come back tomorrow. Tomorrow never came and the jersey

never arrived. After the accident I stopped asking for that jersey. It didn't seem right to buy it now.

For my last dinner in Detroit, my family gathered at a Pizzeria in Dearborn. We had some pizzas and beers. I guess they were good. They just didn't taste right that day. They had a bittersweet taste. Much like the mood of Hockeytown. I was leaving. Going back to Sarasota. I wore my Red Wings jersey proudly but sadly to the airport. My plane was delayed. I had a chance to get bumped and take a voucher. I missed out on that. My luck and the Wings' luck were running about the same now. We were out of sync. I was starting to get that feeling of hopelessness. I was drained. Finally, I got my ticket for the plane.

A first class seat for \$91 bucks. I don't think I ever sat in first class. Maybe things were turning for the better. I sat in row one and watched everyone file onto the plane. I slouched into my seat and got ready for the direct flight back to Tampa. People filing on noticed my Red Wings jersey and some people made comments. One fan, apparently from Philadelphia, commented to me, "Eric Lindros, he's great!" I said nothing. No smart ass retort. No "He's a bum" comment. Nothing. The name meant nothing to me. I sat there numb and sad. And while the Wings had won the Cup, I felt beaten. There should have been a different feeling on that plane ride home. I should have been more up. While this was a more direct flight than the one I took to Detroit a week earlier, I knew this would be a much longer flight. Too much had happened in the week that just ended. And now I was carrying quite a bit of heavy baggage.

Away from the Nest...I Search for Good News from Back Home

...the answer...

Arriving back in Florida put some physical distance between me and the happenings in the Motor City. I was some 1,200 miles away from home now. But maybe because the Wings were in my prayers they seemed closer than ever. I awaited news from Detroit on the condition of the Wings, the same way a mother awaits news from a son serving overseas. I awaited any word with hope and trepidation. I scanned the Internet sites from the *Free Press* and *Detroit News* for any word, any word at all, on the condition of these three men. I had to stay in touch.

I called my friend, Cynthia Lambert, from the *News*, to ask about their conditions. I had to know. I had to pray. The only thing different now was that I was doing it all from further away. I felt sympathy and empathy for the families of these two fallen men. What must they be going through? While I was concerned for their well being, I was not going through anything compared to what the families of the fallen Wings were going through. I prayed that they would have the courage to get through this tragedy.

Still I felt alone, out of the loop, and quite depressed about the whole thing. I felt like no one here in Florida could relate to what I was going through. No one here was wearing red and white jerseys proudly. No one here had suffered through all those years. No one here understood me. I felt homesick. I felt alone. I felt sorry for myself. Then as it so often happens, I was delivered a sign from above. My answering machine was flashing. I had been gone all week. I had 25 messages, which, for me, is a lot. They were mostly business in nature, except for one from a couple of great friends who happened to be in Clearwater and who just so happened to be two of the biggest Red Wings fans I know. The good news had just arrived. And once again just in time.

"Christos Was Watching"

...some sharing...

Kay and Maria, my two lifelong friends, were driving down to Sarasota to spend some time with me. I was excited. They were true friends, whom I go way back with. How far back? Well, let's just say that we used to ride the *Boblo* boat together back in the early seventies. They are the type of friends whom you see once in five years and you both pick up the relationship without missing a beat. You know the types. Good friends, old friends, the best friends. They were coming down, and I was happy that they were. "Where should we meet you?" Maria said, on the other end of the phone. I paused, then the idea came to me, "Let's meet at *WINGS*, the T-shirt place, on the North Trail."

They arrived and I gave them the grand tour of this charming town called Sarasota. They fell in love with the place, just as I had done some five years earlier. They were glad to get away from Clearwater for a day or two. Kay and Maria are sisters who happen to be two of the biggest and brightest Red Wings fans that I know. Their father, Christos, was a family friend and great big Red Wings fan, who sadly had died of cancer a few years earlier. He was one of the nicest human beings I have ever met. What happened to him was not fair. I still think of him and the way he would say, "Hey, Gussie, how are the Red Wings going to do this year?" I miss that. Hey Uncle Chris, I'm sure that you already know anyway, but the Wings did all right this year.

Maria and Kay were ready to talk hockey. They happened to leave Detroit on the same day I was coming in. They were in Florida during Game 4 in preparation for a wedding. Needless to say, they were not too happy with that arrangement. They had wanted to be in Detroit for the victory and the parade. But fate had dealt them these cards, so they had to watch from afar. Because of these circumstances, they wanted to know everything about the festivities in the Motor City. They wanted to hear my story, of how I got into the game. They wanted to talk about the parade. They wanted to talk about the players and the mood in the town. Finally, they wanted to talk about the tragedy. They were heaven sent. I had someone to talk to about the week that had just passed. We went to dinner and then back to my place to watch highlights of the Wings' magnificent flight through the playoffs. We stopped playing the tapes at 3:00 in the morning. We talked about our

happiness for Stevic and the bittersweet feelings that were present with the recent tragedy. It was a special evening, filled with much laughter, deep thoughts, tears, hope and prayer. A number of times, as we watched tapes of Vladdie, both Kay and Maria turned to me and said, "Don't worry, he's going to be all right. It's just going to take time." Hey, that's what friends are for. To help each other through good and bad times. On this night, three old friends who just so happened to be Red Wings fans did what good friends do for each other. We sat, we talked, and we listened to each other. Just good friends hanging out and talking about the joys and sorrows in this game called Life. And somewhere, just as he had done earlier in the month when Stevie raised the Cup, a man named Christos was watching over us and smiling.

IV. THE WISDOM

EXIT...Backwards Is TIXE

...a vision...

I am a Greek-American. So I guess you could say that, in life, "it's all Greek to me." So when I boarded the airplane that took me back to Sarasota after the Wings won the Cup in 1997, I stopped momentarily and noticed the EXIT sign. "That's funny," I thought, "EXIT backwards spells the Greek word TIXE,- which is pronounced Tee-hee and which means "FATE." EXIT backwards means "FATE." That was weird, I thought. But the more I thought about that, the more sense it made to me. FATE and EXIT - they really do mean about the same thing.

Do any of us know when we will exit this game of Life? Do any of us know what fate awaits us through the next door? Of course, the answer is, we don't know. Not a single one of us. Over the rest of the summer, after the Wings won the Stanley Cup up until the beginning of the 1997-98 season, many people would find out what their fate would be. And in those few months many famous people would make their final exit. My life long hero, Jimmy Stewart, sadly passed away on July 2nd. I guess it was time for him finally to get his wings and join his beautiful wife Gloria. The world would first go into shock and then sadness as the compassionate and kind princess, Diana, was killed tragically in a car accident. Watching the funeral in the early hours of the morning, I couldn't help but think of all the good this woman did for the world. As fate would have it, Mother Teresa would pass away within days. How ironic I thought. One woman was affluent, one woman was poor. They were the same, however, in the heart, and during this sad time, the world prayed for both of them.

Many more people, both famous and not so famous, would also meet their fate. It was their time. It was their TIXE. Ever wonder about your fate? I know I wonder about mine. Now almost every time I see an exit sign, it has a deeper and stronger meaning to me. Maybe I'm alone in my thinking, but I know one thing for sure, and that is we are all just passing through this place. Some of us make large impressions when we leave and some leave quietly as we exit. Whatever the case, not a single one of us is here forever.

Recently I visited my priest at St. Barbara's Church in Sarasota. Father Frank was giving me some much needed guidance on some problems I

have been dealing with. Before I exited his office, I noticed a sign on the door that read, "LIFE IS SHORT, PRAY HARD!"

As I drove home, I looked out my car window at a glistening Florida sunset. I thought about my fate and my faith. I thought about my future. I am constantly looking for answers in life. The longer I live the more I realize that the answers are sometimes right there in front of you. Sometimes you find the answers as one door closes and another one opens. The trick is you have to keep your eyes and your heart open, and look for the right signs.

Everything Happens for a Reason

...a purpose...

The tragic accident that occurred on that ill-fated night seems to have happened for no reason at all. It does not make sense. The Wings who had rented the services of the limousine company were supposed to be safe in that limo. But they weren't. They were in great danger. And because they suffered those terrible injuries, it is almost certain that all limousine companies will heighten their safety restrictions and check out drivers and their records more thoroughly. So something good will come out of this tragedy. Perhaps Vladdie's greatest defensive move yet may be helping all the faceless strangers out there who will now ride in safer limos because of this tragedy. It's strange how life works at times. Everything happens for a reason. The accident also brought the team, fans and the city even closer together.

Recently I was involved in an accident of my own in Sarasota. A real freak thing. I was driving along the road near beautiful Siesta Key. My mind wandered for a moment. I was daydreaming for just a couple of seconds and had turned my head away to look at some building that was going up. About this same time, three ducks decided to cross the road ever so slowly. Two cars ahead of me, a car stopped abruptly to avoid hitting the ducks. The car directly in front of me rear-ended that car, and I, in turn, rear-ended that car. A three car pile-up. My car was totaled. I hit my head and was left with a cut on my forehead that strangely resembled the Red Wings logo. The accident was my fault, and I was given a ticket. Thankfully, none of the people involved was hurt. And I can gladly report that the ducks were not hurt, either. They made it without a scratch on their beaks, and their wings were left in tact. They were lucky. So was I.

Why did it happen? I don't know. Carelessness? I was trying to do too much. It taught me something. Slow down. Pay more attention. Take it easy. Don't rush. Everything happens for a reason. This happened to wake me up. Next time, the ducks and I might not be so lucky. So now, as I drive, I go a little slower and I don't rush as much. And you know what? I see the road ahead of me much clearer now. I notice the little things now, like the ducks crossing the street. Yes, everything does happen for a reason. Sometimes many reasons.

Lessons Learned...Life Is a Journey...and So Is Chasing the Cup

...the urgency...

When I think back, I wasn't sure about going to Detroit. I remember rationalizing myself out of it. I had some things to cover for work, I didn't know if I could get a flight, I didn't have tickets. Yada, yada, yada. The excuses were all there for not going. I just had to pick the one that best fit my mood. I was ready to give up on my dream without really going for it. The thing is I had my heart set on going to this game for years. I always had told myself that if the Wings ever got into a position to win a Stanley Cup, that I would somehow be there. Well, here was my chance and I was ready to throw it away without even trying. How would I have felt if I didn't go to Detroit and on my quest? I would have been sick. I would not have forgiven myself. I would not have the experiences and the stories.

Finally, my friend Alice gave me the nudge that I needed. She asked me, "What will happen to all your stuff if you go to Detroit?" "It will all be there when I get back," I said. I got the point. The in basket will just be a bit more full, that's all. It was clear to me. It was a great lesson and one that we all take for granted. Seize the day, *Carpe diem*. Go for it. Just do it! No matter what the slogan or phrase you relate to, it is an important lesson to grasp. Life is a journey and not a destination. Even when it comes to chasing the Stanley Cup or getting into the final game of the Stanley Cup. Oh sure, it's nice to win the Cup and it's wonderful to get into the game, but the pursuit of the goal and the journey toward it are the important things. They are the things that last. They are the things that remain. The actual moment you raise the Cup in victory or you enter the arena without a ticket are just specs of time compared to the big picture, in the game called Life.

Too many people (and I am one of them) place too much emphasis on the goal and not enough credence in the doing. Many of us feel that once we get to that goal, everything will be perfect. When I sell \$10 million of real estate, everything will be fantastic. When I get married and have my 2.3 kids and live in the country, everything will be fine. When we win the Stanley Cup, everything will be great. When I see the Wings win the Cup, I will have complete and endless joy. The fact of the matter is, joy and fame are forever fleeting. What is important is that we take time to enjoy the journey. And while all of our journeys have many different roads, it is impor-

tant to note that no matter who you are and no matter what path you choose, it is important to stop off by the side of the road and pick some flowers along the way. And if you think of it, perhaps even put the flowers in a vase, something similar to a Stanley Cup and smell them once in a while. Because no one - not the guy from Sarasota, Florida, who's writing this, or the lady from Michigan who is reading this, or the Russian defenseman and the Russian masseur who are now recovering - know what lies ahead down the road. That's why it's so important to take flight and chase your dreams whenever possible. Because in life the clock is always ticking, and not one of us is guaranteed of playing any overtime.

Rumors Hurt...but They Can't Kill Hope

...the faith...

"Konstantinov ain't gonna make it." "Number 16 is in bad shape." "I spoke to a nurse from the hospital who said it don't look good." "He won't make it out of the hospital." All those sentiments were expressed to me the day after the accident by a man who was selling Red Wings souvenirs. I wanted to cross check the jerk with a patented Vladdie-like move. The guy really deserved it. Instead I walked away and shook my head. True or not, the rumors hurt. I had hope, but this stuff bothered me.

When I got back to Sarasota, I was telling a friend about my experience in Detroit, and his buddy who was a doctor echoed the same thoughts. "He's done. He's not going to make it out of the hospital," he said in a cold uncaring voice. "How do you know,?" I shot back. "My father is a doctor at the hospital and he told me that it just doesn't look good," he shot back. His words wounded me. I felt sick. I didn't want to believe him, but his words cast some doubt on my overall hopeful views.

On the Internet I surfed through the news of the rumored death of Konstantinov. I was in shock. I called Detroit for confirmation. My mom and sister told me that it wasn't true. I was relieved. Yet, I had questions. Who would start such a rumor? I couldn't understand who would do such a thing. Why would anyone want to? It puzzled me. Then the answer came to me. People who don't have faith and don't have any hope start rumors. They are the same people who don't know the power of prayer. You have met them, and so have I. They are the people who don't believe in miracles. It's a shame. They go through life thinking that they know it all and that they have more power than they think. They miss out on the miracles that take place in life because they are too busy spreading rumors. While the rumors that they spread may hurt, they can't kill the power of hope and prayer.

I had no hope to get into that game that night. I had a wing and a prayer. I had a little hope and a lot of attitude. My miracle happened. And you know what? There are people who don't believe my story. They don't believe things like that can happen. I feel sorry for them. I forgive them for spreading their rumors about me. Yeah, you must have heard them. There's a rumor out that I paid some guy \$2,000 for a standing-room ticket to get in; that I made up my story about how I got in. But we all know better, don't

we? Because, we don't deal in rumors. We deal in hope and we believe in miracles.
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You Probably Didn't Know It...but You Were My Hero

...an appreciation...

Hero. What is a hero? Why do we need them? And perhaps more importantly, where do we find them? Most of us look for our heroes in the packed sporting arenas, on the movie screens, or on the front page of the newspaper. More often than not, when we think we've found them, he or she usually ends up disappointing us and subsequently, we stop believing in them. But instead of giving up on heroes we should just look for them in other places. As I found out recently, they are closer than you think. And we all know a few.

Recently I attended a memorial service for a young lady who was tragically killed in a car accident. She was 18 years old. She had planned on going to Emory University in the fall. Her goal in life was simple. She was going to become a doctor so she could help people. A heroic cause. One by one her classmates, peers and friends stepped to the stage and spoke to the auditorium full of mourners. They spoke of their friend with heartfelt, spiritual and courageous words. The pain that they felt was etched in their young faces. Sometimes the tears overcame them, yet they continued on. They were courageous. They were brave. They were heroic. They had become heroes, in talking bravely about one of their fallen heroes. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "A hero is no braver than an ordinary man, but he is brave five minutes longer." On this day they were all brave five minutes longer.

Now a little girl and her mother have to be brave five minutes longer, day after day as they visit their father and husband at a rehab center. Each day they hope and pray for their hero. Each day takes courage and bravery. Each day they work on being heroes. It is a role that they would gladly trade for a lesser one. But at the present time, they have no choice. Sometimes heroes don't have a choice. So they sit and wait five minutes longer every day, hoping and praying that a hero to millions of hockey fans makes a full recovery and goes back home, which is where most true heroes live.

In my life I've had many heroes. Oh, sure, some of them have been famous, like Jimmy Stewart, Gordie Howe and Al Kaline. But for the most part, you've probably never heard of my heroes. My heroes are my teachers, who taught me five minutes longer after the bell rang all through my life.

My heroes are my friends on the playgrounds, who played hockey or base-ball with me five minutes later while it was getting dark. My heroes are my friends in adulthood, who shared an extra cup of coffee or bottle of beer while providing encouragement for five minutes longer. My heroes are my cherished friends, Mark and Anne Kane, who provide me with insight and bravery for five minutes longer everyday. My heroes are my large family of cousins, aunts and uncles, who gave me love throughout the years. They probably never knew it, but they were all my heroes. They know who they are. Heroes are like that. They don't need to hear it. Still, it's nice to say it to them. Isn't there someone out there who is a hero to you? Finally, here's to my special heroes, my mom, dad and my sister, who showed me spirituality and love and were brave with me for five minutes more each day of my life. Did you ever know that you were my hero? You truly have been the wind beneath my wings.

Waiting on the Wings...Life is not Routine

...an observation...

When I left Detroit, after the Stanley Cup victory, I had an empty feeling. As I got back to Sarasota, I began to fall into a routine. As hard as I tried to fight it, I just as easily fell deeper into it. To me, a routine is dangerous. Routine means I start taking things for granted. I stop focusing on the important stuff and instead concentrate on the things that really don't matter.

As I scanned the Internet for information on the condition of the fallen Wings, I found that more time was devoted to contract talks and negotiations. It seemed that I was not the only one that had fallen into a routine. Money was the thing that was on most people's minds. How much is Sergei worth? What should they offer him? Is Larionov going to stay? Will Fedorov sign? The talks made me sick. Not too much attention was being paid to two men who, only months earlier, were struggling for their lives. The whole routine made me sad and a bit angry.

While it was a shame that the tragedy happened on that ill-fated night, one positive result did occur. Everyone was shaken out of his or her routines. People in this town pulled together and prayed together for something more important than money and less routine than even winning a Stanley Cup. So the next time you start thinking about your life and what's important to you and what isn't, keep this thought in mind. Think about number 16 and Sergei and anyone else you know who needs your prayers, and, remember, they go through their routines every day. Just like you and I do.

V. THE RETURN

Circle the Date....I'm Going Back Home

...the commitment...

All summer long I would glance at the date that I had circled on my calendar. October 8, 1997. That meant only one thing to me and one thing only to any true Red Wings fan. The Wings vs. the Stars. The first game of the season. And more importantly, the night that the Wings would raise the championship banner that they so proudly had won just four months earlier. It seemed like ages and ages had passed since Stevie and the Wings took their victory laps around the Joe. So much had happened over the glorious and trying summer. Summer was finally over, and my thoughts once again focused completely on hockey. Hockey and a wedding back home in Detroit.

The end of the summer gave me another chance to go home and see my family and attend my cousin Erica's wedding. She had just graduated from law school and now was getting married. It seemed like just yesterday that I had watched her play hockey with the boys in her midget hockey league in Livonia. Erica had gone from playing defense to working as a prosecutor. How time flies and how things change. As my trip wound down and the time got closer to the opening night of the Wings season, I had still not secured tickets for that special night. Oh, sure, I wanted to go, but things again weren't quite working out. I asked a few people that I knew if they had tickets, but I received the same canned responses. "Tickets were tight," and "How much are you willing to pay?" were the common replies.

Again I went the route of the scalpers who advertised their great deals in the paper. I called repeatedly but not at the same frantic pace that I had dialed some four months earlier. Over and over I heard the scalpers asking their ridiculous prices: \$400, \$500, \$850, they snapped on the other end of the phone. Over and over, I turned a deaf ear to their requests. After all, I did okay without them last time. Maybe something would turn up, I thought. I was not worried. I had time this time. Not only that, I had other things to attend to, like my cousin Erica's wedding. That was, after all, *the real reason* I had come home in the first place.

A Detroit Wed Thing

...some determination...

A wedding, by definition, is supposed to be festive, happy and hectic. On a beautiful late September day, the day my cousin Erica was to be married, the Shay family was going to redefine the term. Jan Shay, the mother of the bride, would have to be rushed to Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak the day before the wedding to monitor her angry kidney stones. Needless to say, she wasn't too happy about the situation. Determined not to get "shut out" from watching her oldest daughter get married, Jan gutted it out and started talking about being released from the hospital, against the wishes of her doctors. No sticks or stones could prevent her from going to her "Game 4."

The day of the wedding Jan was still in rough shape. Had she been a hockey player, she would have been "scratched" from going to the wedding. But Jan is an extraordinary mother. She is a mucker and grinder. She goes into the corners and does the dirty work like a Joey Kocur or a Kris Draper. Kidney stones or not, she was bound and determined to be in a corner, any corner of that church on this special day and watch one of her stars get married. So when the call came to me on the day of the wedding to pick up Jan at the hospital I was not too surprised. I gladly accepted the assignment and rushed off to the Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak to pick up Jan. As I drove to the hospital in my Stevie Yzerman jersey, I could not help but think of that night when Vladdie, Sergei and Slava were rushed to this same hospital. On that night, the city of Detroit watched as Red Wings players, coaches and management filed into the hospital to check on the status of their injured teammates. No one knew what lay ahead. On this day Jan didn't know what lay ahead for her.

As I sat in the hospital lobby waiting for my sister and my mom "Fredarov" to bring Jan down from intensive care, I began chatting with a few people who worked in the hospital. Then something strange happened. People started asking me if I played for the Wings, and if they could have my autograph. I guess Stevie's jersey fooled them. "Of course, I'll sign. Who should I make it out to?" I said, hardly believing what was going on. I guess the jersey fooled me, too. When a couple of people asked me where I played, I quickly replied that I was a "rookie" and hoped to make the team this year. Anyway, after a few autographs to a couple of sweet nurses, I started to feel little guilty. "I don't actually play for the Wings," I 'fessed

up. "But I am writing a book called, *On a Wing and a Prayer*. Do you still want my autograph?" "Sure," they said."Who should I make it out to?" I said.

Just then my cousin Jan came into the lobby, centering a line made up of my sister and mom. Jan looked rough, but she was laughing. "What were you doing?" she said. When I told her she just shook her head and laughed. I thought they said, "Do you pray for the Red Wings?" not "Do you play for the Red Wings," I explained. She didn't believe me. After saying my farewells to my newly found fans, we jumped in the car and headed to our *Detroit wed thing*. In case you're wondering, Jan made it through the church service and saw her daughter get married. She witnessed her "Stanley Cup Final." It brought a tear to our eyes. We all had a great time watching Erica, the former Livonia midget defenseman, get married on a beautiful fall Michigan day. Even though many people at the wedding were glad to see me, not one person asked me for my autograph. Maybe I should have worn the Yzerman jersey to the wedding after all.

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

...the decision...

Banner day had arrived. And strangely, all day long, I couldn't decide if I was going to the game. Something was different. I didn't know what to do. Should I stay or should I go? It would not be the same. Maybe Tom Wolfe was right. Maybe you can't go home again. The thought of Vladimir Konstantinov and Sergei Mnatsakanov not being there left me with an empty feeling. That coupled with the fact that number 91 was definitely going to be a no-show for very different reasons tarnished my mood. My sister was studying in Ann Arbor, and my dad was too tired to go. It was 6:30, only an hour before game time, and I had still not made up my mind. No decision and then I saw the pre-game story on Vladdie. "Yes, when the banner is raised tonight, Vladdie will be watching from his room at the rehab center. It should be an emotional evening for everyone." Vladdie will be watching. Vladdie will be watching. The thought finally sank in.

What was I thinking? Should I stay or should I go? Of course, I had to be there. If not for myself, then at least for Vladdie and Sergei M. They had no choice. I did. So did Mr. Fedorov. Well, he made his choice and I made mine. I was going! With that I sped out of the driveway in Dearborn at 6:40 and headed toward the Joe for the 7:30 starting time. The drive down was eerie. No one was on the street. I made it down to the Joe in 15 minutes and parked in no time. It was more like a ghost town instead of a hockey town. I guess everyone was already inside.

I still needed to find a ticket. There were no takers. And the atmosphere, while festive, was nowhere near the fever pitch it was for the finals. One thing was the same. Tickets were scarce. As I walked up the steep Joe Louis steps, I found myself in line at the entrance of the building without a ticket. Could history repeat itself? Should I try again. I started toward the entrance and backed off. I couldn't do it. Surely this time I could find someone to sell me a ticket.

Again I prayed. Again my prayers were answered. Only this time, the great ticket provider in the sky sent me a scalper with real tickets. Two real tickets and a price of \$200 a piece. That all sounded very nice to me, but I was by myself and only had \$150 in my pocket. "Hey, buddy, I have two tickets. If you can find someone to buy the other one, you can get in," the scalper said.

"You know, it's never easy," I thought to myself. Finally, after a few attempts, I found someone to take one of the tickets. We negotiated our price, \$125 a piece, and then walked between the two scalpers who sold us our tickets so there would be no problems. Apparently they had seen my act before. We didn't trust them. They didn't trust us. It was the stuff on which all good short-term relationships are built. I was ushered through the doors and ironically got in the door as the guy in front of me pointed back to me and said, "He's with me." As Yogi Berra once said, "Deja vu all over again."

I was in the arena where it had all happened just a few months earlier. Electricity was in the air. This night, like that other night, was special. Yet it was different. So much had changed. Many of the players on the ice were different. I was different. One significant thing changed for me. I didn't have to stand. I had a seat this time. I rushed to section 206, row 5, seat 10 and waited for them to raise the banner.

Banners, Patches and Tears...Oh My!

...the payoff...

I felt anxious when I sat down in my seat. While I was looking forward to the raising of the banner I was also sad that it was all coming to an end. A part of me was looking back at the sweetness and sadness that made up my memories of that special 1996-97 Red Wings team. Another part of me was looking forward with hope and some trepidation. I did not know if these guys on the ice could defend the Cup. They had all been through so much. Who could blame them if they failed. The thought worried me. The thought saddened me. Then, thankfully, the festivities started and snapped me out of my funk.

Mickey Redmond was on the ice, doing a nice job as the emcee. Long-time announcers Bruce Martyn and Budd Lynch were also there helping out. The ice flashed with a giant number 7 as Ted Lindsay's name was announced. The crowd erupted. Then they flashed a giant number 9 on the ice. The crowd exploded in a thunderous roar as Bruce Martyn announced Gordie Howe's name. I was standing. So was everybody else. I didn't need a seat after all. Nobody did. The two former greats and living legends, Gordie and Ted, then raised the seven previous championship banners to the roof as the flashbulbs flickered madly. What a scene! It gave me chills and it made me proud.

From pride to tears. Mickey Redmond fought back tears as he dedicated the festivities to the two fallen Wings, Vladimir Konstantinov and Sergei Mnatsakanov. The crowd chanted Vladdie, Vladdie, and Sergei, Sergei as Redmond told the crowd that the Wings would wear a special patch on their jerseys this season in honor of their teammates. The patch reads, "Believe" with the initials VK/SM. Redmond finished his remarks, "So from all of us to both of you, come back soon. We love you. We believe!" I believe I was pretty much broken up at this time. I don't believe I was the only one. That's okay, I don't mind sharing a good cry with almost 20,000 of my best friends.

Next the 1997-98 Red Wings were announced. Deservingly, Stevie got the loudest ovation. What stood out during this portion of the program were the numbers that were not announced: number 16, number 29, and number 91. Vladdie, Mike Vernon and Sergei Fedorov. They were all missing, and

all for different reasons. All I can remember is that I wished each one of their numbers had been called. I also know there are a number of other fans who felt the same way. Budd Lynch then announced the names of Mrs. Konstantinov and Mrs. Mnatsakanov as Igor Larionov and Slava Fetisov presented the women with flowers. As this took place, the Red Wings tapped their sticks on the ice in honor of their teammates who watched from afar. That is how hockey players salute and applaud.

The Stanley Cup was then unveiled, and the place, once again, went Cup crazy. Finally, in a classic moment, Gordie and Ted handed the trophy to the Captain. From old to new. The passing of the torch was complete. With that, Howe, Lindsay, Yzerman, Lidstrom and Shanahan skated down the ice and raised the banner. The moment was unforgettable. The memories from this evening were priceless. Words could not do it justice. It was a night that the banners and hopes of another successful season were raised. It was a night filled with applause, wild cheers and many honest tears. And finally, it was a night many people thought they would never see. It was a night that the Champion Detroit Red Wings worked so hard for. It was a night that happened, because in each other, they all believed.

The Long Road Back

...the rededication...

A championship was not won on that night in early October 1997. It was just another small step taken along the long road back to a very special place that we all left in early June of 1997. On that perfect June day, we all gathered in Downtown Detroit and watched a parade pass by. The sun was shining and we all felt strong. The road ahead looked clear. As the parade went on and on, we all hoped that it would never end. But like all parades it did end, as it stopped abruptly on Woodward Avenue at a spot that was not on anybody's parade route.

For the 1997-98 version of the Detroit Red Wings, the long journey was just beginning. It was a journey that they would have to make without the spirited Vladdie on the ice and the soulful Sergei in the dressing room. They would, however, be in their thoughts and prayers, and, of course, they would always be close to their hearts. The patch on all their jerseys would see to that.

I, too, was heading on a journey. My parade route would take me down I-75 to Florida. This time I was driving back to Sarasota instead of flying. My journey would take 19 hours. That number matched the number of the Red Wings jersey I would wear for this long trip back. Before I left, my friend Leonard asked me to stand up in his wedding which was to be held on June 13, 1998. That date matched the anniversary of that tragic accident. One sad date. One happy date. A day like any other in which lives change.

I said, yes, to my friend Leonard. It would work out perfectly again, I thought. Another wedding. Another Cup. I threw on my Stevie Yzerman jersey and jumped into my car. I had plenty of time to think as my state of mind would change as often as the leaves did along this scenic drive. I thought about many things. I thought about my life and my future. Of course, I thought about the Wings. Would Vladdie be all right? Would Sergei be all right? Would the families of these two brave men be all right? Would the Wings be all right? Could they do it again? Would I be all right? No one knew. Not really. I just knew that a different part of the journey had once again started for Vladdie, Sergei, their families, the Red Wings, their fans, and me. We just didn't have all the answers yet. And while we knew

that the road ahead was a long one, we all felt that we were on the right one. After all, I believe, all of our futures are mapped out for us.

I didn't know it at the time, but Vladdie was scheduled to make a trip down south to rehab under the Florida sun. As I drove through Tennessee I started to get the feeling that both Vladdie and I would be heading back home for another parade down the streets of Downtown Detroit. The thought warmed my heart. We all have a long way to go, and there may be a few detours along the way. But one thing is for sure. Both Vladdie and I don't need a map to make the trip because we can always find our way back home, especially if there is a parade waiting.

VI. THE RESOLVE

I Believe...the Answer's in the Palm of Your Hands

...the belief...

I arrived in Florida with serious back pain. The long car trip combined with my earlier car accident in late June 1997 produced a herniated disc. The pain would leave me sidelined and cause me great mental, physical and spiritual trauma. The pain left me immobile and grasping for relief. I tried everything in order to get better. Chiropractic, acupuncture, massages, pills, physical therapy. Nothing seemed to work. Everyone offered me advice. Everyone had the secret cure. I kept listening. I kept hoping that someone would give me the right answer. But the more I listened the more discouraged I became. Surgery, I was told, was the only way to cure my problem. Still others told horror stories of friends who were left paralyzed or partially paralyzed by surgery. I listened to everyone, became confused and eventually distraught. I was depressed. I didn't know what to do and I didn't know where to turn.

Then the real answer dawned on me. A very special friend of mine bought me a couple of self- healing books and told me to read them. The point of the books and her message was simple: You have to believe that you can heal yourself if you are ever going to heal yourself. The bottom line is that you have to *believe*. Well, for a long time, I talked a good game, but I didn't believe that I could actually beat this thing. My friend Dawn helped show me the way. She helped me believe in myself. She put an invisible *believe patch* on my chest. And you know what, I started to believe.

With a belief that I could beat this thing, I went to church and I prayed. I had tried everything else. Why not put my beliefs to work through the power of prayer. Week after week I went to church and prayed. I took Holy Communion. Still, I was not better. Some doubt creeped in, but overall I still believed. Then one day in early January something happened as I drove around town. My leg pain worsened, then miraculously I started to feel better. The day was January 6....the Epiphany. It is a day that the Greek Orthodox faith celebrates Jesus's Baptism. It was on this day I started to feel better. I headed over to the Greek church to see Father Frank and tell him the news. I was overwhelmed with joy. I believed that I was finally turning a corner. Father Frank said a prayer for me, and I was on my way.

On the way home I was overcome with emotion. I looked up and noticed a building that I had driven by a hundred times. The WINGS building was a

place that sold beachwear. That's funny, I thought. I never noticed that. On the *WINGS* building were *two giant palm trees*, much like the palms that were placed in the palms of my hand on Palm Sunday before the hockey playoffs. The same two palms that I showed that scalper who helped me get into Game 4 of the Finals. Now the palms were telling me one thing and one thing only. And that is that the answer to my pain was in the palms of my hands all the time. All I had to do was put my hands together and pray. That was one diagnosis that eluded me and one opinion that I will always believe in.

Two Teams Play...Two Teams Pray...and One Man Walks Away

...the reminder...

My back injury had caused me enough pain. Why I had to compound my misery by watching my Detroit Lions struggle on the football field through another Sunday afternoon was beyond me. Still, I had to watch this game against the New York Jets. The stakes were too high not to watch. The Lions still had a chance to make the playoffs, and Barry Sanders was attempting to rush for 2,000 yards for the season. And since when did I need any reason to watch Barry run the ball?

The game was a tense affair that was not particularly well played by either team. Both the Lions and the Jets had to win to get into the playoffs. So, for all intents and purposes, this was a playoff game. The hitting on the field reflected the pressure and importance of this battle. Both teams knew a loss would eliminate them. On this Sunday both teams knew the stakes were high, but what no one knew was how high the stakes truly would become before the game would end.

After a sluggish first half that saw the Jets bottle up Barry Sanders, the Lions came back in the second half to take the lead fueled by the characteristic splendor of the great number 20. The Lions had the lead, and Barry had a chance to run for his 2,000. The game was going along perfectly. All the Lions had to do was stop the Jets from scoring and they would be in the playoffs. Play after play, the Lions defense rose to the occasion. Things were starting to look good. Then the Jets ran a play to the left and Reggie Brown's side. Bodies collided and helmets smashed. Just another play. When the clock stopped with 11:36 to go in the fourth quarter, Reggie Brown lay on the ground. The stretcher was called for. The ambulance came. The look on both the Jets' and Lions' players said it all. All of a sudden the game wasn't so important.

A hush came over a packed stadium. Both these teams had seen this scene before. The Lions experienced the loss of Mike Utley on an eerie Sunday afternoon years earlier. I was at that game. The Jets, too, lost Dennis Byrd to injury some years back on a similar play. Now it was happening again. The pain of the memories was apparent on everybody's faces as the paramedics tended to the fallen Lion.

Some players looked dazed while other players had tears in their eyes. Time seemed to stand still. The paramedics carried the injured Lion off the field. After a long delay the players could now go back to playing football. But before they did, both teams knelt on the sidelines and prayed for this fallen giant. It did not matter what team he played for, it only mattered that they prayed for him.

The game resumed and the Lions won. Barry broke a long run and ended up with 2,053 yards for the season before he was carried off the field on the shoulders of his teammates. The Lions were going to the playoffs, the Jets were jetting home, and Reggie Brown was not going anywhere. He was strapped in for his own protection in a Detroit hospital awaiting some of the biggest tests of his life. Jets coach Bill Parcells would say that he didn't care about losing the game, and that he only "hoped and prayed that Reggie Brown would be okay." Thankfully and quite miraculously some weeks later, Reggie Brown would walk out of the hospital. Even though his football career was over, a new chapter in the book of his life was about to be written.

Hey Mike...I Owe You...Owe You..!

...the charity...

When I was growing up, my mom and dad taught me well. "Gus", they said, "never take anything that doesn't belong to you and always pay your own way." Well, I've pretty much lived that way my whole life. It's simple.It's clean. And it's a philosophy I believe in.

That's why I want to straighten out something right now that has been bothering me for a while. I never paid for my ticket to that special Game 4. I feel bad about it. I know that I prayed for help and got in. I know that I found my way in and for that I will be forever grateful to God, the One who sits in the greatest sky box of all. But Mr. Ilitch, to be honest with you, I like to pay all my debts. And I know that I owe you, owe you. So I want to pay you back. Here's how I would like to do it.

I'm sending you a check in the mail as soon as the playoff season ends for a standing room ticket for Game 4 of last year's finals. I know you have heard that "check is in the mail routine" before, but the check will truly be in the mail. You have my word on that.

Secondly, you'll have my words on it. From the proceeds of this book, I plan to donate portions to various churches, charities and causes, including the foundation that assists those who have suffered injuries similar to those sustained by Vladdie and Sergei. That's the least I can do. It will make me feel good. And even though I know I didn't have a seat that night, I still had the time of my life and I want to pay for my way in. It's my way of saying thanks for everything, Mr. Ilitch. I hope that this *sits* okay with you. I just wanted to let you know *where I stood* on that very special night.

Fathers and Sons and Other Winners and Losers

...the understanding...

Before I headed down to the Joe Louis Arena for Game 4, my dad asked me to do one thing for him. He wanted me to call him from the game so that my family would know that I had made it in. My dad was teaching the power of positive thinking, and I was now in my mid-thirties. He didn't say, "Call if you get in." He said, "Call me when you get in." What a gift. Thanks, Dad. I didn't appreciate it when I was younger, but I cherish those things now. Especially now after I've had a few losses and disappointments of my own.

My dad taught me a lot of things when I was growing up. He taught me how to hit a curve ball and hit the cut off man. He taught me to dream big dreams and he gave me many of my creative gifts. But the greatest thing he taught me, he's probably not even aware of. You see, the greatest thing I've learned from my dad is the concept of winning and losing. The strange thing is that I didn't learn it when I was younger, winning and losing on the ball fields and gymnasiums of my youth, while my dad watched. I learned this 1,200 miles away from my old man, as I participated in the games of adulthood, and as I began to win and lose things more important than a baseball or hockey game. When I was younger I never thought I'd lose, I only thought I'd win. Recently, as I got older and started to lose more, I began to understand my dad more. Oh, sure, we have our moments when we don't get along and we can't communicate. Through forgiveness, I've learned to overlook some of his shortcomings and some of mine. I have learned to appreciate his good and bad points. In my time of losing, my dad became more humane to me. I understood him better now. His triumphs. His tragedies. His victories. His losses. They had now become my losses and in the end they would become my victories.

You see, we are all a combination of the winners and losers that we have known in our lives. We all have the capacity to carry the Cup as a champion, and we all can be the goat on the next play. One minute you're on top and the next minute you have fallen. Most of you understand. Stevie Yzerman understands better than most. Of course, Red Wings fans can write a book on it. And my dad could write a few of the chapters himself, on winning, losing, and on dreams fulfilled and unfulfilled.

My dad has sold meat to restaurants for 50 years. When he started, around 1946-47, Gordie Howe was just a rookie. That year, hockey would meet the eventual Mr. Hockey. That same year in the restaurant world, Detroit would get introduced to a meat man named George Samson Mollasis. In large part, because of that, the singer/songwriter named George Mollasis would remain anonymous to the masses. The fact of the matter is my dad is a songwriter, a great songwriter. He never got a chance to pursue his dream to its fullest potential and become the entertainer that he would have liked to become. He lost his dream. And the world lost potentially one of the great songwriters of our time. What the world got was a great salesman and we got a "Greek Willie Loman" who put bacon on the table for us while being a pretty decent dad.

As I write this, I struggle for direction in my life. I am left with choices that my dad unfortunately did not have. I can pursue a career in business or I can pursue the dream that I have. That dream is to become the writer that I think I can become and want to become. It is a decision that is not without winning and losing. As I look at my dad's life, and in essence, my life, I see it now more clearly than I have ever seen it before. Where before it was black or white, gray has now appeared. Where before my dad was always wrong, I now know that he was right more often than not. For a good part of my life, I felt like I was shortchanged. I now realize that I had an enriching upbringing. But most importantly, I've realized that he did the best that he could in raising me. You can't argue with that. And because of that I can't argue with him. I've lost most of the anger. Understanding has won out. So on that night from a frenzied Joe Louis arena, I made a phone call to a meat man whom I've gotten to know better as the game of our lives has played on. Now I realize that no matter what the score is, that man is a writer, a winner and a loser. And, you know what? So am I.

Now Playing...for the Detroit Red Wings....Hope

...the wish...

So who will suit up for the Red Wings? You can never be sure who will be in the line up from one day to another. There is somebody, however, who will definitely be suiting up for the Wings. As a matter of fact he's always suited up for the Wings. His name is Hope. Hope doesn't have a jersey. Hope doesn't have a number. Hope doesn't even have a first name, like Bob or No. There isn't a big enough number or jersey to contain the hope that will play for the Wings. Hope just wants to hang around and keep the team in the right frame of mind. Hope is an optimistic guy. You can't see him, but he's there. Hope is a guy that may not score any goals himself, but he may help the entire team score a whole bunch. Hope will assist all the Wings players just as he has done every year. Only now his role will be much, much bigger. Hope will also help the fans of Detroit. In fact, Hope in Detroit has always been a fan favorite. You see, you can't be a Red Wing or Red Wings fan and not play with hope or root with hope. That's just the way it is and the way it's always been in the Motor City. Hope is an important part of the Red Wings organization. You won't find him in any program, and he won't do any interviews after the game, but he will play a big part in that Red Wings lockeroom. Now playing for the Detroit Red Wings, Hope. We're all glad Hope's suiting up with us. We're glad our team has Hope. They need Hope. We need Hope. Now more than ever.

Full Circle...Vladdie and I Heal Under the Sun

...the recovery...

As I sit writing these final chapters in Florida, I am troubled. I do not know where to end the story. The truth is, that this story, like your story and mine, is one whose ending is a mystery. So, as another playoff season approaches, I am torn. One part of me looks back over the past year and another part of me looks forward to the next. As I write this chapter, it is once again Friday the 13th. Only now it is March 1998. And both Vladdie and I are in Florida healing under the Florida sun. Back then in June, on Friday the 13th, both Vladdie and I were celebrating the overdue and much-deserved Stanley Cup victory.

We were both in the arena on that special night in June. We were both there at the parade down the streets of Downtown Detroit. Today we are both in Florida, healing, hoping and praying for better, brighter days ahead and perhaps another chance to bask in the sunlight of another Red Wings Stanley Cup victory.

For a long time I debated about heading down to South Florida to meet with Vladdie and his wife and wish my best to him in person. After much soul searching, I decided against it. My heart told me that I didn't have to travel the miles to be close to him. I could feel him without making the trip and without going the distance. Not only that, but I felt he should be left to heal with dignity and in privacy. Surely, I could pray for him from afar.

After all, I have a hunch that we will meet again in a place very familiar to both of us. And we will all be feeling much better. The scene is perfect. It is at the Joe Louis Arena. Vladdie raises another Cup at center ice, while Sergei Mnatsakanov watches from behind the Wings bench. Me, you know where I'll be. I'll be standing with my back against the wall in standing room only, at center ice. Full circle indeed.

I Believe, We Believe...Do You Believe?

...the faith...

So do you believe? I mean do you really believe? In yourself? In miracles? In your dreams? In your hopes? In your prayers? Well, do you? Well, I believe. Oh, sure, sometimes I have doubts. That's normal. But if you believe, truly believe, then the doubts will be erased. Sometimes slowly at first, but eventually they will disappear.

So let me put you to the test. Do you believe that Vladdie and Sergei will get better? I mean really better. Do you think that Vladdie could ever walk again? Be careful how you answer that. Think a minute. I take that back. Feel for a minute. By all means, don't answer that question with your head, because this is a question that you must answer with your heart. Don't expect the answer to make sense. Because questions of faith, hope and prayer can only be answered with the heart. It is at times like these that miracles happen. The important thing is that you believe. Vladdie says it right there in the Red Wings video. "I'll be back." Those words seem prophetic now. What, you're not going to believe him? Not me. I'll take my chances with the Vladinator. Of course, things are going to be extremely tough for him. For both him and Sergei. But I know that they'll make great strides toward getting better. Much better. Look how far they have already come. Can it happen? I believe it can. Because if you believe good things can happen, they have a strange way of actually occurring. Not only can Sergei and Vladdie recover significantly in time, but so, too, can the thousands of other people who have sustained similar injuries. The key is you have to keep hoping and praying for the best.

In my life I was fortunate to meet my hero, the late, great actor, and even greater American, Jimmy Stewart. I met him once on his front lawn in California. What a great feeling! When I told people how it happened, they listened in disbelief. When I told them that I was going to New York to see Jimmy Stewart at a tribute and that I had hopes of meeting him again, people laughed. Come on, Gus, you really don't think you're going to meet him again, do you? When I did meet him again on that trip, people couldn't believe it. I knew that it was possible. I believed it could happen, so I wasn't so shocked and surprised when it did happen.

There will come a day, and it might not be soon, but a certain Russian with

a flair for hitting opponents will hit the ice again. He will be strong and he will be alert. He might not be exactly the same as he was before, but he will be back. He might even take a skate around the ice with The Cup again.

So how do you feel? Remember, there is only one answer if you truly are a believer. And we know that you believe, because we believe, too. The last thing you want to do is be the last one to jump on this bandwagon. This is is one bandwagon that is full of true fans who won't be shocked by any miracles. As a matter of fact, we expect them to happen. So if you see us whooping it after this miracle happens, don't ask us to explain how we knew. We just felt it. And remember one important thing, we always believed.

Playoffs and Perspective Under the Palms

...the perspective...

Another playoff year was well under way and it couldn't have come at a better time for me. The prospect of settling back into my routine of watching my Wings through another run at the Cup was just what the doctor ordered. Palm Sunday 1998 arrived and again Father Frank and Nicholas presented me with a couple of palms for my Wings. "Happy anniversary and good luck to your Wings," Nicholas chimed in as he greeted me in church. I had a nice feeling of deja vu, but yet something seemed different.

As I got into my car to go home, I noticed that I had lost my palms. I didn't think that was a good sign.I frantically searched the grounds and the church hall, where I was met my Father Frank's daughter. "What's the matter, Gus?" she asked. "I lost my palms, Maria." With that she pulled an extra palm out of her purse and handed it to me. "God bless you, Gus."

I headed back to the car with my mom, Fredarov, who was in town visiting. Just then we saw Nicholas in the parking lot and subsequently, we told him what happened. He asked us if we needed some extra palms. "Sure, if you have them," we replied. With that he handed us two more palms. I had replaced my lost palms. I took that as good sign and felt better as I drove home. When I got home I placed the two palms on the mirror of my bedroom dresser, just as I had done last year. There, they would remain and there they would provide comfort, hope and inspiration as I prepared to watch the Wings battle once again for the Cup. The more things change the more things stay the same.

Once again, for the most part, I was again confined to my condo to watch the Wings. All the prayer in the world still did not help me restrain myself from becoming too emotional when watching a Wings playoff game. For the Phoenix series, I ventured to the *Sports Page* for Game 3 and watched through a snowy picture as the Wings and Osgood blew a two-goal lead in the third period. A TV blackout forced me to the *Ale House* to watch the Wings wrap up the series with some strong play in front of many Detroit patrons draped in red and white.

St. Louis brought on the blues and some doubt as the Wings were outplayed and beat in Game 1 of the series. Game 2 saw the Wings wake up and put

the game of hockey, even playoff hockey in perspective, as St. Louis defenseman Chris Pronger stumbled to the ice after being hit near the heart with a slap shot. The arena went silent. The players' faces on both teams had the same expression. Concern. Brett Hull had tears in his eyes as he skated to his bench. In the stands, the fans' faces had pretty much the same expression. As Fox announcer, Mike Emrick surveyed the situation, he asked the TV audience to pray, if they were praying types. Many of the fans in the Joe Louis must have heard him and were already praying for this fallen athlete. When it comes to praying, at least, the Detroit fan has always been a little ahead of the game and always able to keep the game in perspective.

Game 3 arrived and saw Chris Pronger skate onto the ice, much to the delight of everyone who is a fan of the game of Life. This game would also provide its share of excitement. The Wings dominated and outplayed the Blues through the entire game and were staked with a 2-1 lead with just over a minute to play. With 55 seconds on the clock Al MacInnis skated up to center ice and fired a long hard shot on Osgood. A routine shot. It's in. The game is tied. Everyone is in shock. I am speechless, alone, in my condo searching for answers. Quick, throw a blanket over me. The phone rings. It is my mom, Fredarov. "Gus, are you okay?" "What the heck happened?" Barely understanding her, I said, "Mom, I can't talk now, I think I'm going to be sick. Bye." Click.

The Wings nearly won it with less than a minute. Then St. Louis nearly won it. The game went into overtime. I grabbed a beer to calm myself. I went to my closet to put on my lucky Yzerman jersey and to glance at the palms that were on the bedroom mirror. Overtime starts and the Wings dominate play. Then the Blues nearly win it after hitting two posts, but the puck doesn't cross the line. A good break. The game goes into a second overtime. Lidstrom rushes the puck up the ice and makes a nice pass to Larionov, who makes a nicer pass to Shanahan. A possessed Shanny puts the puck through the legs of Fuhr. The Wings win. The Wings smother Shanny and Ozzie. It is midnight, and the Wings, myself, Ozzie and countless Red Wing fans everywhere will be able to sleep tonight.

Before I go to sleep I channel surf for highlights of the game. I click to Letterman. The channel surfing stops. The highlights can wait. Actor Christopher Reeve is the guest. He is hooked up to his wheelchair and the accompanying apparatuses that have confined his body ever since his tragic horse-

riding accident took place some years back. Over the loud noises of the breathing machine to which he is hooked up, Christopher Reeve talks calmly, almost peacefully, about life and scoring some goals of his own. Like walking again, like playing with his child, like doing so many of the things that we all take for granted. "I believe that some day they will come up with a cure and that some day I will walk again," he says.

He speaks with confidence, he speaks with an inner faith, and he speaks with a hope that leaves everyone in awe. Myself included. All the while he does it with a smile, and a laugh as he jokes with the usually sarcastic Letterman. On this night Dave is not sarcastic. He is moved visibly by this man's attitude and courage. The interview ends as Dave gives Christopher Reeve a warm hug. As they come back from commercial, Dave is still visibly moved. "I just want to tell you, that man (Christopher Reeve) is truly a hero," Dave says in an uncharacteristically serious tone. Hey, Dave, I couldn't agree with you more.

Before I turn the TV off, I look at the palms on my mirror. It has been a memorable night. On this night, I saw one young man named Ozzie and one veteran team handle the adversity that accompanies a playoff hockey game. I saw one young man named Chris Pronger just thankful to be able to skate unto the ice again and play one more shift. And finally, I saw one man, one real life "Superman," deal with the prospect of being confined to wheel-chair for the rest of his life. And he did it with dignity, hope, faith, courage, and a smile that left me in awe. One memorable night. Three moving stories, and one new-found perspective under the palms.

A Smile, A Tear, Another Cup, Another Year...You Get the Picture

...smelling the flowers

To win a Stanley Cup takes hard work, determination and guts. To win a second straight Stanley Cup you have to have a little luck, a lot of heart, and you must be able to play through the pain. Both the kind endured on and off the ice. The Detroit Red Wings know how to play through the pain. Because they all know what is important in life. They get the picture.

I watched Game 4 of the 1998 Finals in Detroit on TV. The result was a foregone conclusion. Everyone knew that the Wings would wrap up their second straight Cup on this night. The thousands of Red Wing fans who made their way to Washington knew, for sure. While I wanted to be there, I was content to watch the TV picture that was beamed back to me at home in Motown.

So on this 16th day of June, they would win their 16th Stanley Cup playoff game, in large part, for number 16, Vladimir Konstantinov and Sergei Mnatsakanov. Sweet 16 indeed!

A smile, a tear, another Cup, another year...you get the picture.

As the Wings wrapped up their second straight championship with their second straight sweep, something seemed different to me. Was I excited? Yes. Was it the same as last year? No. Was it better? I don't know. It was different, that's all.

The clock counted down on the Capitals, as the scoreboard showed images of Vladdie in the stands. Everyone, not just those wearing red and white, rose to their feet to give him a rousing ovation. The horn sounded and when Lapointe jumped into Ozzie's arms to end the game, the crowd went crazy.

This year Stevie Yzerman did double duty as far as trophy collecting was concerned. First, he picked up the Conn Smythe trophy as the Most Valuable Player of the series and then he had to pick up that other trophy. Draped in his road red, while missing that same tooth from last year, the Captain lifted the Cup over his head. Then just as he had done last year, he looked for someone to share the Cup with. Only one question remained unanswered. Whom would he hand the Cup to first? Stevie had Ozzie on

his mind. But a whisper from Shanny and a chant of Vlad-die! Vlad-die! Vlad-die! from the crowd gave the Captain the answer.

Vladimir Konstantinov had made his way back onto the ice. Smiling from ear to ear, as the crowd cheered and teared, Stevie handed the Cup to Vladdie. The cameras clicked crazily for this memorable photo opportunity, as his teammates huddled around him and the Cup in an outpouring of love and affection. The picture was beamed all over the world, to hockey towns in over 180 countries. While the TV ratings may not reveal it, and certain magazines didn't cover it, it has been reported that this picture increased tissue sales in all of the countries where the game was shown.

A smile, a tear, another Cup, another year...you get the picture.

You could see it in his eyes. He just wanted to hang out with the boys again. To share a laugh, share a smile, swap a war story or two and maybe even share a smoke. But definitely, most definitely he wanted to be there to share in the celebration and share a victory lap around the ice. Vladdie was beaming. It was the kind of therapy that is priceless and not easily measured. His little girl then kissed her daddy, Vladdie, and the smile on his face gave great joy to anyone who saw this picture. While it didn't erase the horror of last year's tragedy, it went a long way in easing the pain. As we have all learned, Red Wings players and fans know a little bit about playing with pain.

One fan in particular, who plays with pain is a special friend of mine. She is seven years old and her name is Allie. Allie has had three major heart surgeries in her young life. She takes medicine daily to monitor her heart condition. While she is active, she can't play contact sports like football or hockey like other kids her age. But you know what? She never complains. She goes about her business and does all the other things that kids her age do. Like practice dance routines, read stories, sing, play on swings, avoid homework on nice days, watch taped games of the Stanley Cup Finals, and wait ever so anxiously and patiently for an old friend who is late to show up.

Late by almost a half-hour she still greeted me warmly as I turned down her street off Woodward Avenue. Allie lives within an earshot of where that fateful accident occurred in June of 1997. In fact, she remembers hearing the sirens that night. As I drove past the house, she yelled and waved to me. My own personal parade! She greeted me with a red balloon, that said "Way to Go Wings," and then gave me a big hug and smile. I melted. When I handed her a Stevie Yzerman shirt, her smile, even while missing a few teeth like some of her hockey heroes, lit up the entire street.

Allie proceeded to show me a few dance routines, sing a couple of songs, and finally show me some of her drawings. Then Allie gave me a present. A real gift. The best kind. The kind you don't expect. She handed me a picture that she drew. It was a picture of the Stanley Cup, with some flowers, and a bright sun. "Here Gus, it's for you," she said in her squeaky seven-year old voice. Again I melted. I flashed her a smile while I fought back a tear. The picture was mine to keep. An autographed original from a little girl that said, "To Gus, love Allie." To me it was priceless.

Before I left we sat on the swings and Allie asked her mom a question. "Mom, is there going to be another accident this year?" Allie's mom answered, "I hope and I pray not." It was a serious, sobering question from a little girl, who wants to be an artist when she grows up.

As I drove away, I thought of the picture that Allie gave me. It made me think of Vladdie and his little girl. Some sun, some flowers, a cup full of love and a smile from a little girl can take all the pain in the world away. It had been an incredible few days, that rounded out an incredible year-long journey with the Detroit Red Wings. I went to the parade the next day and joined in the splendor and joy with an estimated 1.2 million people. It was wonderful and heartwarming to see all the Wings, especially Vladdie and Sergei basking in the sun again.

Two days. Two parades. One with a crowd of over one million people. One with a crowd of one. And from it, one important lesson taught to me by a young artist who sees the world through her heart. One special, brave little girl who handed me the Stanley Cup, and made sure I got the picture.

On a Wing and a Prayer

...the peace...

You win a Stanley Cup and everything seems so right. You accomplish something you've tried to achieve for your whole life and the day is bright. And then in the turn of a moment, fate deals you an unlucky blow. Tragedy strikes and the goals that you had set out to attain just don't seem as important as they once did. Perspective takes the place of pride. Prayer takes the place of celebration. And somewhere, a broken wing starts to mend. Such is life. So special, so beautiful, so precious and so vulnerable. In one split second you are on the top of the world, smiling and taking in the sunshine that is life. In the next instant you have fallen, the smile has disappeared and the skies have darkened. A kind fate that embraced you earlier and put you in the heart of a parade while adoring fans watched in awe has changed to a cruel fate that slaps you down as the parade seems to pass you by. The winners and losers in life are separated by such a thin line. So close is the margin between a champion and a runner-up. In hockey, a missed check, a blown save and a shot that hits the post instead of going in can mean the difference between drinking from the Cup and crying in your beer. The difference is so minute between winning and losing. The same is true in the game of Life. In this game, in which the stakes are much higher, a thin line separates all players from joy and pain, and from triumph and tragedy.

In this game, the one we all play in every day, we don't know from minute to minute if we will get a chance to be in the line up tomorrow. No one knows for sure if their latest game will be their last game. The important thing is that you play the game. Play it hard, honestly, and as if it will be your last game. Because in life, as in hockey, there are bad calls, bad breaks, and sometimes the result is not the one that you expect or even deserve. In that way the lesson is simple. Get the most out of your ice time. Don't squander your opportunities. Spread your wings, take flight and chase your dreams. Because you only have so much time, whether it's on the ice or not, to play in this glorious game of Life. So now two men, two hockey champions, face the toughest period of their lives. How will they get through this tragedy? Will they ever be the same? For that matter will any of us be the same after this glorious and painful period? It's impossible to answer these first two questions. But one thing is for sure, I will never be the same. And maybe you feel the same way, too. I've learned that we all are going through life on a wing and prayer. All of our futures are

uncertain. From the guy that drives the Zamboni to the lady who serves beer at the concession stand, and from the fan with the highest priced Stanley Cup ticket to the fan with no ticket at all, one thing is for certain in life, and that is that life is uncertain.

John Lennon once said that "life is what happens when you are busy making plans." Making plans. Whether for a wedding, a Stanley Cup game, or a parade, life is happening every day. So I made my plans. I hopped on a plane and took flight after a dream. I did this with no guarantees. I did this without really knowing what the result would be. Sounds a lot like life. Then at a time when I thought the dream had eluded me, when I had just about given up hope, I was shown the way. I grabbed my chance. I seized my opportunity. At one point I didn't expect to get into that game, and maybe that's why I did get in. I placed my faith in a higher power and it happened. I got by on a wing and prayer.

In 1997, not too many people expected the Red Wings to accomplish their goal and win the Stanley Cup. Yet they did it. In 1998, not too many people expected the Wings to repeat as Champions, yet they did it in a show of love and dedication for their fallen comrades. And now, after that tragic accident and days and days of hope, prayer, and faith, there is now, finally, some light at the end of the tunnel. Where before it looked bleak, it now seems brighter. It wasn't always that way. Many people doubted they would ever leave the hospital. Many people still believe that these men can't fully recover. They don't expect them to get better. But that's okay, I know better. That's just when the unexpected happens. For miracles to happen, you have to apply for them and you have to believe in them. And they do happen, they happen often, and they've happened to me. They've probably happened to you, too. You just have to have a little faith. You just have to have a lot of hope. You just have to believe. And if you have these beliefs, you can get through anything in life, on a wing and a prayer.

Epilogue

Truly an inspirational book for Red Wings fans, Detroit sports enthusiasts and all who seek to understand the complexities of life. Having known Gus since childhood as a Sunday school classmate and a fellow altar boy, I can say without hesitation that he is one in a million. For those who are fortunate enough to call Gus a friend, as I am, know they are truly blessed. With this book *On a Wing and a Prayer* the literary world can now meet this wonderful man.

There is a wealth of inspiration in this book for all. For me, I have rediscovered my childhood reverence for the Red Wings, Tigers and Lions; and, for my heroes I grew up with. Like Gus, I was a loyal fan of these teams through the late sixties, seventies and eighties. But when players ceased to be loyal to their team and fans over the last few years or so: when they began playing more so for the money than pride; when players started holding out because of contracts; when in that infamous October there was no World Series; when football and hockey players struck; when the virtue of loyalty became greed and professional sports lost its innocence, I like so many others, forsook these teams.

I questioned my loyalty to them. If they could not be loyal, why should I be? Sports like so much in our society became another business: all that counted for the owners and players was the bottom line. Having been so disillusioned by professional sports of today, a few years ago I began living life completely alienated from these teams I worshiped as a child. I hadn't read a sports page in years and made it a point to turn the TV off before the sportscaster came on. And this from someone who still remembers when the Lions played at Tiger Stadium; from someone who as a child would cover his ears when the puck would hit the glass at Olympia; and from someone who slept with his 68' Tigers pennant for a year.

The Pistons back-to-back championships didn't bring be back. Inter league play in Baseball didn't bring me back. Barry Sanders 2,000 yard season didn't bring me back; surprisingly, nor did the Red Wings back-to-back Stanley Cup victories bring me back.

Yesterday, I read *On A Wing and a Prayer* in one sitting, unable to put the book down. I read for the first time in years the names of players that early in my life flowed from my lips like honey. Through Gus' eloquent and animated writing; his love of life together with its drastic and subtle intricacies; and his passion for our Detroit teams, I rediscovered my childhood reverence and awe for MY teams!

After finishing the book I sat back in my armchair, lit my pipe and turned the TV on. To my amazement I saw something which I hadn't seen in 30 years! I happened upon the inter league game between the Tigers and Cardinals playing in St.

Louis. I wept and laughed at the coincidence and the inexplicable joy of seeing something that I had not seen since game 7 of the 1968 World Series. It was a sign like so many in this wonderful book. It's time to heal. It's time to come back home. It's time to take the old Red Wings jersey out of the memorabilia box in the basement. It's time to go back to Michigan and Trumbull.

Thanks to Gus and to his *On a Wing and a Prayer* I'm taking my seven year old to his first Tiger game tonight: they're playing the Cubs. I have a lot of stories to tell him. I have a lot to remember. I have a lot to teach him. Gus, next time we meet, let's put our jerseys on (excuse me if mine smells like mothballs), talk about our Wings, take some shots, say a prayer for our fallen Wings and those heroes on and off the ice who continue to be an inspiration to us all.

Bless you Gus. "Bless you Boys." Haven't said that since '84!

Father Michael Varlamos

Special Thanks

Special thanks to my parents, George and "Fredarov" Mollasis for providing love, my sister, Cleanthe and my brother-in-law, Draganov, for believing in me and providing me with inspiration, all my aunts, uncles, and my cousins back home, especially Pierre, Steve, Maria Georgilas and my cousins, Andrea Georgilas, Gus, Jan, Erica, April and Danny Shay for their never ending support. Johnny, Gus Pappas and Uncle Johnny for helping to show me around the ballparks of America and for their sound knowledge of the games. Thanks to all my friends back home in Detroit, especially Danny Korovesis, Jim Ochmanski, Steve Hirons, and Mike Trudel who helped keep me updated through the years. I miss you all so much. A very special thanks to my good friends, Marshall Bice and Eric Gasiorowski, my mentors, fellow writers and two of the best creative minds in the entire city of Detroit. Thank you all for editing with your heart. You truly are the "Production Line." Thank you to John Griffin, for proving that he is a worthy proof reader. Thanks to my great friends in Sarasota, especially the compassionate Dr. Mark Kane and his gracious wife, Anne, the older brotherlike, Mark Ruffalo, and his sweet wife Karen and the entire gang at the Sports Page. A special thank-you to Alice Massanari who helped give me the insight and nudge that I needed, Rick Moody the professional and courteous usher who made space for me, my standing room only buddies who gave me even more room, and of course, a special thank-you to the entire Detroit Red Wings organization for their pursuit of the dream, and especially to that toothless Captain who proves with his class and dignity, both on and off the ice, that sport figures are worthy role models, if they are worthy human beings. A special thanks to my friend, Cynthia Lambert, who is a beat writer that is hard to beat. A special thank-you to Maria and Kay Nicozisis who helped me keep the faith. To Pastor Weeks, Father Frank Kirlangitis, Nicholas, and Father Michael Varlamos, good men of the faith, who put the answers in the palms of my hand. To Dawn Cutter, who helped me believe in myself again and in the long run helped make me a stronger person. Thank you to the Karadimas family for defining the term friendship. Thank you to Ilene Moses for her being a role model and for helping me meet Mr. Stewart. A special thanks to Dave Brittain, for his thoughtful foreword which brought tears to my eyes and all his help and work behind the scenes. A special thank you to Jason Gedrick for his honesty and inspiration. A special thanks to Kristin Tuttle for her art, vision and her patience on this project. To Harry Cook who taught me the skills of reporting at Wayne State University. To my teacher Mrs. Hiller who taught me to write Affect saw An west series about 12 and a series an easily as a series and a series

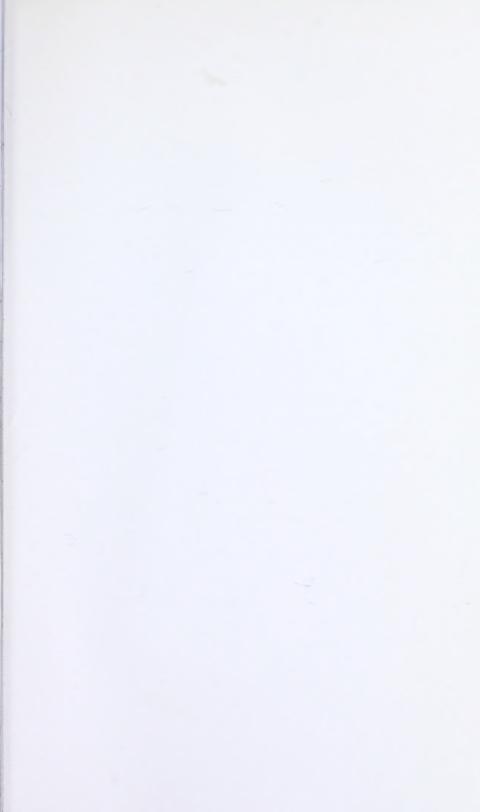
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arbal proceeds from the book will go to the Vicidie and Sargal condition as well as other deserving charities.



what follows is my journey, my flight if you will, with our Wings, through the triumphant and tragic run of 1997 and subsequent return to glory in 1998. You're invited to take the journey with me. It was a wild trip in which we all won so much, felt so much, grew so much and were in danger of losing so much.

the years were filled with tears of joy and moments of pain. And from this journey, perhaps we have all learned that life is not only about the games we play, but it is also, more importantly, about the power that we all have when we pray.

-Gus Mollasis

"For years I have missed the great stories like Brian's Song. Thank you for the resurrection of the truest sports spirit. On a Wing and a Prayer is written in an honesty that takes me back to my childhood dreams. You can bet my kids will appreciate it, too."

-Jason Gedrick

Motion picture Actor
Star of the recent hit movie "The Last Don"

